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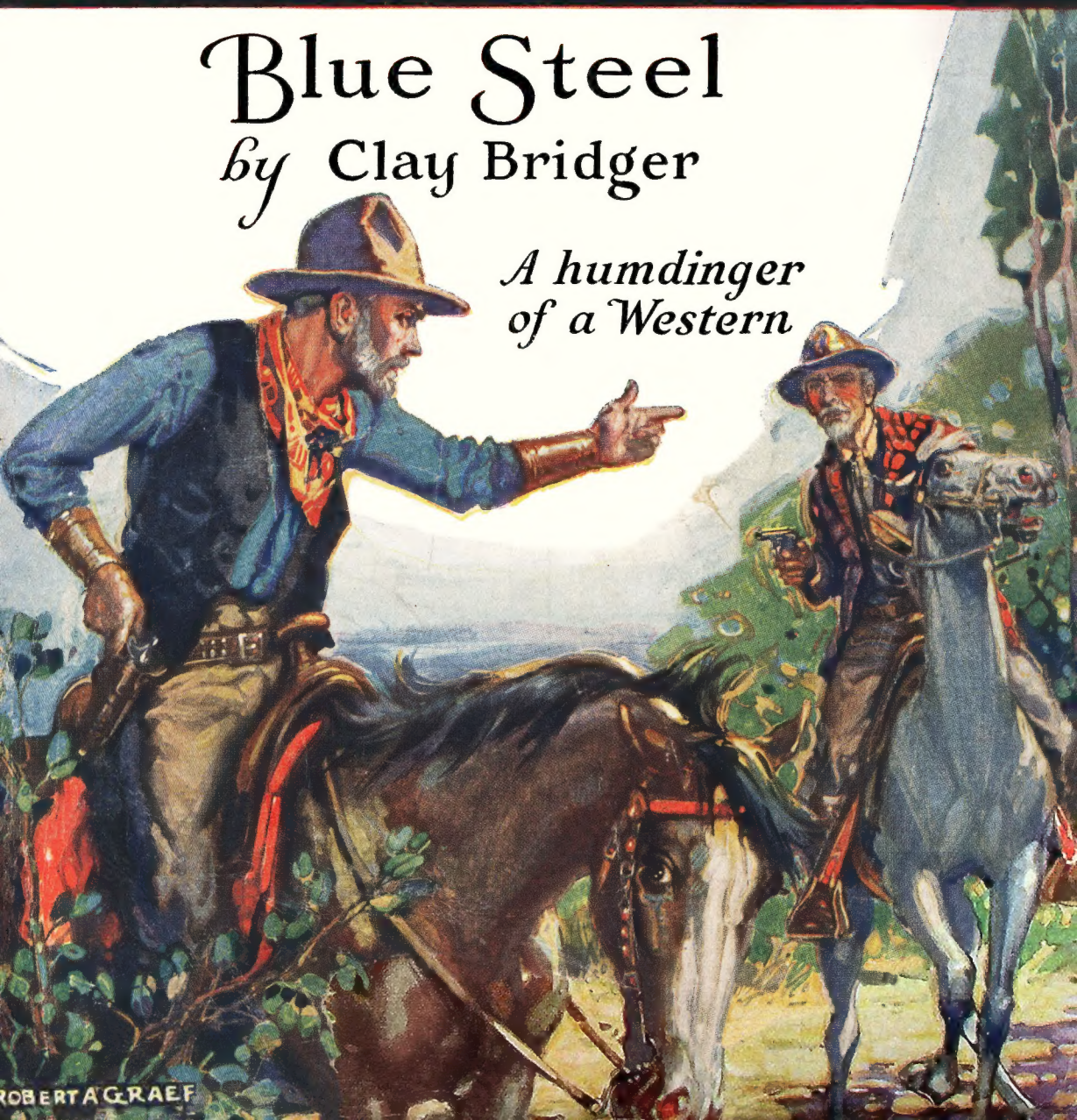
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by Clay Bridger

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this magazine

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOLUME 192

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NUMBER 6

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY W E E K L Y

VOLUME 192

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1928

NUMBER 6



Blue Steel

By CLAY BRIDGER

CHAPTER I.

LOOMING TROUBLE.

DAVE DIBBLE, the old postmaster of the little cattle town of Poco, was sorting out the mail which had been dropped from the express train; the dropping of the mail pouch was the express train's sole gesture of recognition of such a dot on the prairie as Poco. Not only did the long train from the East fail to stop or to slow up in passing through Poco; it seemed actually to put on more speed than ever and continue humming and roaring westward into the night.

There were perhaps forty or fifty letters and eight or ten newspapers in the sack which Dave had picked up from the station platform and brought to his general store, a tiny link in Uncle Sam's great post office system.

Dave had opened the pouch, extracted the contents from it, and placed them on the counter. Then he had adjusted his spectacles and, with his elderly wife assisting him, and with more official mien about her than even old Dave himself, he slowly commenced to sort the various letters. As he read the names of the addressees, he passed them to Mrs. Dave, who put each

one into its proper cubbyhole in the rack behind them. Dave occasionally peered at the postmarks on the envelopes, and in the case of postal cards often turned them over to read the text. Mrs. Dave never failed to do so.

"Nope, they ain't nothin' here for you, Billy Perkins," the old man told an anxious-looking young puncher who had been waiting impatiently while the postmaster completed his scrutiny of the mail. "I reckon thet thar gal you met while you was ridin' in the rodeo back in Noo York has plumb forgot you, Billy."

The young man flushed and drifted out, and Dibble looked over his spectacles at the others who were gathered there. "Cain't do nothin' for you to-night, Mrs. Hansen," he told a little old lady. "Thet thar mail-order catalogue had ought to be in any time now, but it ain't here yet." Thus old Dave went the rounds, with a not unimportant air, disbursing conversation and in some instances mail, until only his wife and himself were left in the dimly lighted store.

"Did you notice, maw," the old man then said, "thet a letter come for ol' man Steele? It come from somewhar over yonder in South Dakoty, an' by the han'-writin' on it I reckon thet it was sent to him by Ballou."

Mrs. Dave had not failed to notice it. "The postmark was a little blurred," she said. "I couldn't see nohow what town it was mailed at, an' course it's from a different place if Ballou Steele sent it."

"Fust letter he sent the ol' man in nigh a year, maw. I reckon ol' Steele 'll be tickled to git it."

"It's a downright shame, the way thet Ballou Steele acts!" snapped the old lady, clicking her teeth and her thin lips together like the jaws of a trap. "He's been gallivantin' aroun' ever since he was knee-high to a grasshopper, a-raisin' ructions from Mexico to Canady. He don't pay no more attention to his pore ol' father than if he was a stranger. Never comes to see him, or hardly never writes to him or nothin'."

"If I was a man," she continued, "I'd fork a horse an' go lookin' for thet good-

for-nothin' loafer an' give him a piece o' my mind, I would. It's a caution, the way he's bringin' sorrow to his paw thataway."

"If you was a man," replied the old postmaster rather dryly, "I reckon thet you'd think different about forkin' a hoss an' settin' out after Ballou Steele."

"He ain't no feller to trifle with—thet hombre! Why, what do they call him, from Montany right down into Texas? Blue Steel, thet's what they call him! Jes' plain Blue Steel, like six-guns is made out of."

"An' why do they call him thet?" asked Dave, somewhat dramatically, well knowing that he was going to answer his own question. "'Cause he's hard, 'cause he's fast, an' when he speaks it means somethin'."

"An' yet," he mused, "they say as how he's right tender-hearted, thet he ain't never killed a man yet. Not even a nester, an' not a Mex, even. I reckon thet people as knows him ain't very quick to rile him up."

"Huh!" breathed Maw Dibble scornfully. "If he's so brave, an' everybody's so skeered of him, he oughta be back here a-helpin' out his pore ol' father. Things are gittin' mighty strained between the Wagon Wheel an' the Lazy S, an' mark my words, Davy Dibble, somethin's goin' to happen hereabouts pretty soon."

A shadow fell over the face of Dibble and he nodded his gray head slowly.

"I reckon you're right, maw," he conceded. "Jerry Steele an' Tom Tolliver ain't never been friends. They both come from some place back in Kaintucky when they was young, an' they brought a feud out here with 'em."

"But up to a couple years ago they didn't bother each other none. Then they kinda started bickerin' an' warrin', an' now—"

Dave paused a moment and ran his fingers over his thinning hair. "An' yet I wouldn't thought that either of 'em would have got so ornery as to pizen water holes an' cut fences an' such like. Well, you can never tell," he sighed. "I like both Jerry Steele an' Tom Tolliver, an' I hope thet somehow they make up their differences."

"Them hard-headed ol' fire-eaters won't make up nothin'," said Maw Dibble. "They'll jest keep on fightin' till somethin' happens."

"It 'd be a shame," said the old postmaster, "if anything happened to Tom Tolliver. That son o' his ain't goin' to amount to shucks. He spends his time a-drinkin' an' a-devilin'. No wonder he got kicked outa college. I reckon thet was fair what killed his mother. He don't do no work at all."

"Blaine's a gentleman," said Maw Dibble. "You don't expect a han'some feller like him to be a plain puncher, do you?"

"Gentleman?" echoed Dibble scornfully. "Mebbe he is, but he ain't no *man*! Not accordin' to my reckonin'. Jest a kind o' pretty boy, an' I s'pose thet's why you like him. His sister, though, is a reg'lar gal. Her little finger's wuth more'n all o' thet Blaine."

"She's a kinda pretty gal, an' I reckon thet's why you like her!" retorted Maw Dibble belligerently. "She acts too high an' mighty, in my opinion, since she come back here from that finishin' school. Finishin' school! Huh! Well, I never knew it to fail to finish a gal bein' a good honest rancher's wife."

She looked a little sourly at her spouse, as if old Dave were to blame for such a condition. Dave did not pursue the matter directly any further. Instead, he asked:

"We never kin agree on nothin', kin we, maw?"

"You're too sot in your ways, Davy Dibble," said his wife sharply. "Thet's the trouble. You're never right about anything, an' you won't never admit it, an'—"

The incipient tirade was interrupted by the opening of the door, and Billy Perkins, the young cow-puncher, came back into the store.

"I told you once there wasn't no mail for you, Billy," said Dibble mildly. "Mail don't come into Poco every five minutes."

"Cain't a man come in to buy a sack o' smoke-dust without bein' pestered about mail?" asked Perkins in an aggrieved tone. "Why, I never give a single thought to mail," he added ingenuously. "Who'd I git a letter from, anyhow?"

"Thet gal in Noo York thet wrote you," chuckled Davy. "The one thet you wrote ten times to."

"Ten times nothin'!" exclaimed Billy. "It was only eight times."

"She prob'ly couldn't read your spell-in'," said Dave.

"Gimme a sack o' tobacco," replied Billy morosely, "an' forgit about that gal."

The tobacco was forthcoming, and Billy opened the bag and deftly rolled a wheat-straw cigarette and lit it.

"You ridin' back to the ranch to-night, Willie?" Maw Dibble asked him.

"Yessum," growled Perkins, trying to hide a scowl in a cloud of smoke. Maw Dibble always called him Willie; and he detested that appellation.

"We might trust him with thet letter to Mr. Steele," suggested maw to her husband.

"Trust me!" repeated Perkins. "Course you kin trust me to carry a letter. You don't think it's too heavy for me; do you? You don't think I'd git fagged out afore I got to the ranch?"

"Now, Willie," said maw in a motherly tone of voice, "you know you're only twenty, an' you're sorta onreliable." She looked at him keenly. "Y'ain't been drinkin' to-night, have you, Willie?"

"Naw," replied Perkins nonchalantly. "Only ten or twelve whiskies, that's all."

"If you had even one, Willie, I'd smelled it on your breath," said maw pleasantly.

"An' she would, too," offered Davy positively. "She's shore gotta accurate nose for lickin'."

"Don't ever drink, Willie," admonished maw. "You don't wanta fill a drunkard's grave, do you?"

"I don't wanta fill no grave at all," Perkins asserted positively. "Leastwise not for a long time yet. If that letter's ready," he added, "I'll go down to the Corral an' pick up Blackie Sanderson an' Dick Stevens an' go lopin' on to the ranch."

"Thet Corral Saloon ain't no fit place, Willie, for a nice young boy like you to go. You jest poke your head through the door, Willie, an' call Blackie an' Dick out."

"Sure," replied Perkins, with a grin.

which he meant to be cynical. "That's jest what I'll do."

"Say, maw," suggested Davy, "why cain't Billy take the mail for Dunstan along with 'im, too? He'll be passin' the Bar X on his way to the Wagon Wheel, an' he might as well drop in thar. It 'll save one o' the boys a trip to town."

A slight scowl appeared on the bronzed face of the young puncher, and after two or three puffs which withered his wheat-straw cigarette, he said:

"I don't like that danged remittance man, but I'll tote his mail along if you want. I'll do it for you—but not for him!"

"Why, Willie Perkins!" exclaimed Maw Dibble. "You shouldn't speak so 'bout a gentleman like Mr. Lafayette Dunstan. You don't have a proper respect for no one. Mr. Dunstan's older brother, they say, is a lord in England. Mr. Dunstan comes from royalty," she added, meaning the nobility.

"I don't care what he comes from," growled Perkins. "I don't like him, an' there's no law what says I gotta."

"Me, neither," chimed in Davy. "He's too durn friendly like an' smooth."

"Hear him!" said maw derisively. "He kicks 'cause a man's too friendly. Davy Dibble, y' ought to be plumb ashamed o' yourself for makin' any 'sich remark. Course Willie's only a boy, an' he don't know no better."

"Say!" exclaimed the exasperated Perkins, who wished to pose as anything but a boy. "It's gittin' late, an' I gotta be skimmin' along. If you'll gimme that mail—"

"Here 'tis, Billy," said Davy, extending the letters which he had taken from two cubbyholes in the rack behind him. "This here one's for your boss. Looks like it came from his boy, Ballou."

"Blue Steel!" exclaimed Billy in a worshipful tone of voice. "Gosh dang it, but I wish he'd come back to these parts. I remember him when I was only a kid. Maybe he's comin' back."

"Maybe," Dave agreed. "You cain't never tell. An' these other letters are for Dunstan. There's three or four of 'em,

an' one of 'em's the dough from London; that long one, I reckon. He gits one every three months. I've heered tell it's on condition thet he stays outa England."

Billy's conversation was cut short by Maw Dibble, who wished to close up. The youthful puncher swaggered bow-leggedly out of the store, forked his pinto horse, and loped swiftly down the street toward the Corral Saloon, the one drinking place in Poco.

CHAPTER II.

FIRE.

THE Corral was a rambling frame structure, wide and long, and a low veranda, or "gallery," slouched across the front of the building. By the light of a bright moon Perkins saw that there were twenty-odd horses tied to the hitching rail.

He rode swiftly up to the rail, slipped easily from his saddle, and, leaving the reins dangling toward the ground, walked up the veranda steps. He was determined not to linger in the saloon, as it was already rather late, and he had a two-hour ride ahead of him.

Through the closed door came a babel of ribald voices, and through one of the windows came eddies and swirls of blue smoke with which the Corral was usually impregnated.

Opening the door, Perkins walked into the saloon and peered through the smoke in search of the two companions with whom he had galloped in from the Wagon Wheel.

He noticed that a group of punchers from the Lazy S, Tom Tolliver's ranch, were standing at the front of the bar. Big Dan Naylor, apparently somewhat the worse for liquor, was discoursing in a loud and provocative voice.

"A man," he said, "that 'll cut a fence had oughta be strung up like a hoss thief!"

It was an ambiguous statement, that might have been of a general application, but Perkins knew that it was a dangerous utterance under the circumstances. Only three weeks before a long section of fence

on the Lazy S had been destroyed by some one with a pair of wire clippers; and Perkins knew that the outrage was attributed to his own outfit.

The silence that followed Naylor's loud assertion was indicative of its ominous significance.

Perkins nodded to the Lazy S group, and most of the men silently and somewhat contemptuously returned the salutation.

The young puncher noticed that Blaine Tolliver, his weak, youthful face flushed and his eyes vacuous from too much liquor, was leaning lazily against the bar.

Then out of the silence there came from the back of the saloon a voice that Perkins recognized as Blackie Sanderson's.

"A slinkin' c'yote that 'd pizen a water hole oughta be made to drink the bad water himself!" he asserted acidly. "That is what I allus said, an' I maintain it now, an' allus will."

Not long before a bunch of cattle belonging to the Wagon Wheel outfit had been found dead near a reservoir, and it was generally believed in Poco that the water had been poisoned by some of the Lazy S men.

The cutting of the Lazy S fence line and the poisoning of the water hole on the Wagon Wheel had been only two of a series of depredations that both ranches had suffered over a period of more than two years.

It was apparent that the immemorial feud that had existed for a hundred years or more between the Tollivers and the Steeles, which had been quiescent for decades, was smoldering again and was about to break into destroying flames.

Perkins, walking down the room toward the rear end of the saloon, saw that a number of punchers from the Bar X were loitering near the middle of the long bar. That was the way it had been since the friction between the Lazy S and the Wagon Wheel had started to manifest itself in the incendiary outrages that the two large ranches had been suffering.

The Corral was the only drinking place in Poco, and it was patronized by the whole town and particularly by the employees of the three ranches that lay closest to Poco.

The Wagon Wheel outfit had appropriated the rear of the bar, while the men belonging to the Lazy S had their meeting place at the front of it.

Between them, and isolating the warring factions from each other, were generally congregated a number of hands from the Bar X. The latter managed to maintain a strict neutrality, and it was understood that Dunstan, their employer, insisted upon this.

Perkins had the impulse to stop and give Dunstan's letter to one of the Bar X men, but he thought better of it, and, saluting the Bar X hands perfunctorily, he walked down to the end of the bar. After all, Maw Dibble had given him the letters to deliver, and it did not behoove him to tamper with the U. S. mail.

He would be passing right by the Bar X ranch house on his way back to the Wagon Wheel, and leaving the letters would only mean a moment's delay. Blackie Sanderson, Dick Stevens, and the other Wagon Wheel boys greeted him jovially.

"Set 'em up, Schmaltz," Sanderson ordered the short and puffy proprietor of the Corral.

Schmaltz was a timid and inoffensive German, who always wore somewhat of a frightened expression in his blue eyes. A more positive and belligerent man than Schmaltz, occupying his position as proprietor of the Corral, might have had more difficulty in handling the turbulent spirits of the cattle country.

But no one picked on Schmaltz, who, late at night, when the liquor had been flowing freely, always looked as though he were ready to vanish down behind the bar in case bullets should commence to fly.

Perkins noticed that Schmaltz looked particularly worried this evening, and deduced from this that the animus existing between the hands of the Lazy S and the Wagon Wheel had been more strongly manifested than was usual of late.

Schmaltz mopped up the bar, and, producing a bottle of rye whisky, set it down before the Wagon Wheel waddies.

"I'll take one," said Perkins, "an' then I expect we'd better be lopin' along, Blackie."

Billy Perkins, much to his secret sorrow, could not make a drinker out of himself. He did not like the taste of whisky, and the only effect it had on him was to nauseate him.

"Lopin' along?" echoed Blackie. "This ain't no time to lope along. As long as we are here, we can be sure that there ain't no Wagon Wheel water holes bein' tampered with."

Again it became so silent in the Corral that the sound of a pin, dropping to the floor, might have been heard.

"I see," said one of the Bar X in a rather nervous voice, "that a show's comin' to town. Thet's suttinly a right handsome gal on thet thar sign."

He was looking at a highly colored lithograph which hung on the wall of the saloon, opposite the bar. It contained a picture of a buxom blonde, clad in skin tights, and it advertised the impending arrival of "The Grass Widows," musical extravaganza, presented by the Burke & Berkowitz Burlesque Company.

According to the poster, the production had enjoyed a "long and successful run on Broadway," and it was "touring the country with the original New York cast." It was, of course, one of the cheapest of the turkey burlesque shows wilccatting about to any community where it could more than make expenses; but the credulous inhabitants of Poco were not sophisticated in matters theatrical.

A rather anæmic-looking advance man had arrived in Poco a few days before and made arrangements for the use of the Odd Fellows Hall, where the aforesaid "Grass Widows" were to display their charms and talents.

"Reckon you'll attend the show?" the Bar X man asked Sanderson.

The latter reckoned he would. "That is," he added in a clear, loud voice, "if I don't have to stay on the Wagon Wheel keepin' a watch out for a passel o' thievin', sneakin', lyin', well-poisonin', white-livered polecats!"

"Meanin' who?" barked Dan Naylor, separating himself from the Lazy S men, and stepping out into the center of the saloon. His hands were dangling at his

sides, close to the grips of his low-swung guns. His eyes were mere slits, and as he stood there, tense, he gazed steadily and menacingly at Sanderson.

The Wagon Wheel men crowded closer to the rail, while Blackie stepped away from them, out into the room, as if accepting the challenge that had been thrown at him by Naylor. For a moment the two men stood there, eye to eye, while the others in the saloon steeled themselves for the gun fight that seemed imminent.

"Meanin'," said Sanderson insolently, "any one that takes—"

The front door opened, and a lean, powerfully built man stood on the threshold. A silver star gleamed on his coat, and there were two guns in his hands—two guns that somehow seemed to cover every one in the saloon.

"That 'll do, boys," the newcomer drawled in a soft voice. "I'll drill the first man that wiggles his little finger. You two hombres," he instructed Sanderson and Naylor, "I reckon you can be on yore way to yore outfits. Thar ain't goin' to be no gun play while I'm sheriff o' this county."

Sanderson started to say something, but Sheriff Reynolds cut him short. "No speechifyin' from you cow-pokes," he cut in. "You two hombres seem to be honin' for trouble. Well, thar ain't goin' to be no trouble. Here, you!" he directed Dan Naylor. "You're nearest to the door. Migrate out o' here, an' take yore hoss an' git breezin'."

"But wait a minute! You git that hoss, an' keep right on goin' toward the Lazy S—an' don't stop, an' don't slow up. In five minutes I'm sendin' this here fire-eater on *his* way." He motioned to Sanderson.

"Now, it don't take much reasonin' to see that you birds could tangle together an' git gun fightin' up the trail a piece; but that ain't goin' to happen. No, sir; if either of you men is shot by the other, I'm here to say that it 'll be worse for the *other* fellow than for the man that's shot. Thar'll be quick justice, or my name ain't Bob Reynolds."

"The lucky man 'll be the man that's shot, for the other man 'll have a nice necktie party, an' he'll be the guest of honor,

I reckon I've made it clear that you boys is goin' to ride on to your ranches—with no trouble."

Under the guns of Sheriff Reynolds, Dan Naylor slouched out sullenly, got on his horse, and started away toward the Lazy S. A few minutes later, with just as poor grace, Blackie Sanderson loped away toward the Wagon Wheel.

Sheriff Reynolds was no man to fool with. He stood there until the form of the second rider was quickly lost in the darkness. Then he reëntered Schmaltz's saloon and called for a whisky.

"The time to break up these shootin' matches is when they start," he announced, "or just a leetle before. Them hombres was too full o' red-eye to hold thar heads, an' it's been lookin' like trouble around these parts for some time. I ain't no reformin' sheriff, an' the rest o' you punchers can drink yore skins full if you want to. Them other two'll cool off 'fore they've loped very far, an' I reckon when they wake up with headaches to-morrer they'll forgit mostly about this matter to-night."

The presence of Sheriff Reynolds was somewhat of a dampener to the spirits of the rival factions in Schmaltz's saloon. The men remained for the better part of an hour, and then, under the watchful eye of Reynolds, the Lazy S group slouched out to their horses and started toward their outfit.

A few minutes later the Wagon Wheel hands made their departure.

Billy Perkins, the youthful cow hand, galloped along with his comrades until he came to a group of tall trees which marked the entrance of the roadway to the Bar X ranch house, where he turned in to deliver the letters for Dunstan that had been given him by Davy Dibble.

He delivered them to the Jap servant, then he galloped on alone to the Wagon Wheel. The bedroom window of old Jerry Steele was dark, but Billy Perkins believed that an infrequent letter from Blue Steel was sufficient warrant for waking up his boss.

Also, in his youthful way, he wanted to be the first to tell his employer of the tense scene in the saloon.

He hallooed gently up to the bedroom window, and old Jerry Steele stuck out his gray head and learned the cause of the late summons.

He invited Billy in, and his fingers trembled as he tore open the envelope which bore the handwriting of his son. His eyes rested anxiously on the brief letter, and then a glad light sprang into them.

"Some real news, Billy," he announced. "Ballou's comin' home. By golly—my boy is comin' home!"

The old man's blue eyes sparkled. "He is a Steele all right," he announced proudly. "He says he's heard some vague rumors that they've been ridin' me pretty hard, an' after all this promiscuous roamin' around he feels that his place is here now. That's a Steele for you, Billy, all the time. Well, we'll give the boy a royal welcome."

"We sure will," answered Perkins, who was somewhat of a worshiper of the wandering Blue Steel. "We sure will."

"Billy," said old Steele, crossing to a cupboard, "I ain't any snooper, but I know the boys in my outfit that's always drinkin' an' hellin' around. You ain't one of 'em. But there's a time an' place for everything; an' I reckon that on the head of this here news I'm goin' to set up a little drink for the both of us. Golly—Ballou's startin' to ride home to-morrer! I kin hardly believe it."

While he sipped his drink with Billy, the latter related to his boss the impending trouble that had been broken up by the timely appearance of Sheriff Reynolds.

"Well, I'm glad that Blackie Sanderson rammed that down their throats about poisonin' the water," said the old fire-eater. "That 'll leastwise show 'em they can't come no shenanigan on us—that we know all about their devilments."

"Now, when you git over to the bunk house, Billy, you might tell Blackie an' Slim Carlin to keep a little more watch on things around here to-night. I reckon there's plenty o' trouble breedin'."

"The men that want to lose a little sleep to-night by watchin' about can have a full day off in town to-morrer. Yes, sir, I kinda smell trouble, an' I'd get right over there now, Billy, an'—"

There was a loud shout from below the window. "Oh, J. S.! Y'up thar, J. S.?"

Jerry Steele walked to the window and put his head out.

"Them damned slinkin' c'yotes has been up to somethin' else," called Blackie Sanderson, whose tall form was outlined in the lampglow from the window. "Some o' their prowlers has fired the hay barn. 'Fraid there ain't no use to try an' save it."

He pointed toward the south corral, where tongues of flame were starting to light up the grounds. Two or three shouts from the direction of the bunk house showed that some of the cow-punchers were racing toward the scene.

Old Jerry Steele stood calmly at the window; that is, his posture was calm enough, but there was a blaze in his blue eyes.

"Well, I reckon that's the last straw, Billy," he said quietly to the youthful cow-puncher, who had joined him at the window.

"There's been an armed truce between the Wagon Wheel and the Lazy S for some time. From now on, Billy, I reckon as how it's goin' to be just plain war!"

CHAPTER III.

CONSPIRACY.

LAFAYETTE DUNSTAN, sitting before an open fire in the luxuriously appointed living room of his ranch house, felt very much at peace with the world. His mellow state of mind had been induced partly through the stimulation afforded by two bottles that stood on a small table near his right elbow. One of these contained Scotch whisky; the other was a siphon of seltzer.

These two ingredients, properly combined, formed a concoction that was very much to the taste of the owner of the Bar X. His round, pudgy face glowed with satisfaction as he sat there staring into the fire with his shrewd blue eyes.

It was apparent, from the way Dunstan glanced occasionally at a very thin model watch, that he was awaiting the arrival of some one.

Dunstan was a man of forty, and he had been in the Powder River country in Wyoming for some four years. He was, as was rumored in the district, the younger brother of an English baronet.

There were other features in the life and career of Lafayette Dunstan that were not the subjects of rumor, however, for the simple reason that they were neither known nor suspected by any one in the district.

Certain vicious and seemingly incorrigible tendencies had resulted in his departure from England when he was in his late twenties, and for some years his brother had kept him on the move, the theory being that if he was not permitted to linger long in any one community he might not have time to get into trouble.

For a long time, under the conditions imposed by his elder brother, he had been obliged to travel from town to town through the United States, in order to obtain the remittances upon which he depended for his support.

He had, in those days, received a letter once a month. Each communication notified him where, on the first of the following month, he could draw his allowance. In this way he was driven from city to city and town to town until his existence had become a sort of a nightmare to him.

Finally, driven to desperation, he had written a pitiable letter from Sheridan, Wyoming, asking that arrangements might be made whereby he could buy a ranch and settle down to a more peaceful life..

Lord Dunstan had heeded the letter, and made arrangements, through his solicitors, whereby his younger brother had purchased the Bar X. Lafayette's allowance, at the same time, had been materially reduced, and it was forwarded him quarterly.

While Lafe Dunstan, in the years that he had been an Ishmael, had not lost any of his inherent viciousness, he had gained a certain amount of hard common sense. The Bar X, when he bought it, was not a large outfit, but it was amply stocked, and, properly handled, would afford him a good income.

Dunstan had that keen intelligence which so often is coupled to an unscrupulous character, and he had diligently applied him-

self to the business of raising beef cattle extensively.

Any definite pursuit had seemed easy after those interminable years of tortuous, tiresome wandering which had been imposed on him by his austere brother. Every time he thought of the latter, who had inherited the family fortune and a title through the English law of entail, Lafe Dunstan had felt the stirring of hatred in his heart, and a fierce desire to acquire land and amass riches so that he could return to his native land like a nabob and snap his fingers in the face of his sanctimonious relative.

This desire for vengeance, perhaps, had spurred him on more than his consideration for his own welfare. He not only had kept a close watch over the affairs of his own property, but he had made it his business to acquire all the information he could regarding the neighboring ranchers.

His own ten thousand acres lay to the east of the forty-thousand-acre domain of Jeremiah Steele, who was best known as J. S. Then, beyond the Steele ranch, lay the fifty-thousand acre principality of Thomas Tolliver.

As Lafe Dunstan had pondered over the magnitude of the neighboring estates, his own ranch had become shrunken in his estimation. He had not been in possession of his property for a week before he had learned that Steele and Tolliver were bitter enemies, because of some feud which had originated in their families generations before either of them were born.

He had gone out of his way to be genial and friendly with both of the old ranchers. They had met his advances, however, with a certain reserve which had barred any real intimacies.

Dunstan, however, out of the wisdom he had absorbed during his bitter years, had not made any display of resentment. He had quietly cultivated the acquaintanceship of Blaine Tolliver, the son of the old rancher, and by posing as a sophisticated man of the world had made a deep impression on the callow young fellow.

He had shown a deferential courtesy toward Sally Tolliver, whenever he chanced to meet the girl, that he believed must have

been gratifying to her. In spite of this, however, the superb young beauty had failed to encourage his addresses, a circumstance that rather irked him.

He attributed her attitude to shyness or coyness, and on the whole felt that if developments warranted such a step he could win her affection. Some day he would require a wife to grace the Bar X ranch house, or even possibly the ancestral Dunstan estate in England. He thought of this as he sat by the fireplace, and he was conscious of a glow of warmth that even the Scotch and soda could not induce.

Thus far, he complimented himself, he had played the game with a finesse of a master diplomat. He would—

A soft bell rang somewhere in the distance, and a sleek-footed Japanese servant glided into the room where Lafayette Dunstan was lounging.

"I expect Weston," said Dunstan. "If it's Weston, bring him right in."

The Jap padded away, and returned a moment later with a short, slight man who carried a sombrero in his hand and who walked so cautiously over the Oriental rugs on the hardwood floor that he looked like a cat trying to essay a passage over fly paper.

He was a swarthy type, with black, lank hair; his eyes, too, were dark, and a cast in one of them gave him a sinister expression.

There was a flicker of amusement in the eyes of Dunstan as he watched the progress of his visitor across the large room, but this changed to a genial smile of welcome.

"You look like Eliza crossing the ice," he remarked with a laugh, as his guest, still paying due regard to the treacherous rugs, advanced toward a chair that was standing by the other side of the fireplace.

"These dang rugs," the other replied, "are worse than buckin' broncs. I can't nowadays git used to 'em."

"Well," Dunstan told him, "just grab hold of that chair, Simeon, and then sit down quickly, and you'll be out of danger. There, now you're right-o. How about a little whisky and soda?"

Simeon Weston, foreman of the Bar X, gulped a little and cleared his throat.

"I reckon if it's all the same to you, Mr. Dunstan," he replied, "I'll have a little snort o' straight rye."

"You just have to ask for what you want, Simeon," Dunstan told him as he touched a bell at his side. "You ought to know that by this time."

The Jap appeared, and Dunstan ordered him to bring a bottle of rye and a glass for Simeon. The latter gulped a stiff drink, and after a moment appeared to be more at ease.

"I reckon thar'll be hell a-poppin' to-morrer," he said, with a grin. "Thet's if everything goes off all right to-night."

"You gave the boys their instructions this afternoon, then?" queried Dunstan.

"Yes, sir," replied Weston. "An' they will foller 'em out all right, too, I reckon. Thar's quite a crowd in Poco to-night, an' thet's a good thing under the circumstances. Steele an' Tolliver won't know who to suspect. I seen a crowd from the Wagon Wheel a-ridin' toward town early in the evenin', an' a bunch o' the Lazy S punchers went by here a little later. A gang of our boys is in Poco, too."

Dunstan smiled with satisfaction.

"If I'm not mistaken," he said, "Mr. Jeremiah Steele and Mr. Thomas Tolliver will be at each other's throats pretty soon. And then—"

The conclusion was too obvious for Dunstan to voice. His smile held a great deal of significance.

"You've done masterly work hereabouts, Mr. Dunstan," said Weston, who, under the influence of the liquor, had lost some of the reticence he had displayed when first he entered the elaborate quarters of his employer. "Of course, boss, you cain't tell how things 'll turn out. If—"

"If," interrupted Dunstan, "we start open warfare between the Wagon Wheel and the Lazy S, it will be a fight to the finish. They are hard-headed old codgers, Steele and Tolliver. If they once start battling they will never stop until one or both of them are ruined or dead."

He paused and meditated a moment.

"And then," he said, "the day will come

when the Wagon Wheel and the Lazy S will come into my possession, and I," he continued, with flashing eyes, "will have a real domain. A hundred thousand acres of the finest ranch land in the world, and thousands upon thousands of cattle grazing over it.

"Then," he added, somewhat bitterly, "I may leave you here in charge of it, Simeon, and go back to England and show that brother of mine a thing or two."

Simeon Weston responded to the compliment that Dunstan had paid him.

"Thet 'll be mighty fine of you, Mr. Dunstan," he acknowledged. "I reckon I could manage the ranch all right."

"I know you could, Simeon," replied Dunstan, "and you're going to have the opportunity. I stick by my friends, and when my plans go through there are several people around here who will profit by them."

"Do you reckon," Simeon asked, "thet you'll have any trouble gittin' yore hands on the ranches?"

"How can there be any trouble?" replied Dunstan. "One of these old ranchers is sure to kill the other one. If Tolliver is popped off, the Lazy S will go to Blaine Tolliver and his sister. I've got Blaine, that young fool, under my thumb now.

"He owes me plenty of money, and he will owe me more before I get through drinking and gambling with him. He will do anything I tell him to do, and if his father is killed by old Steele, I know just how to incite him to get a vengeance that will put the other old man out of my way.

"If, on the other hand, Tolliver or any of his men manage to kill Steele, there won't be anybody left to take care of the Wagon Wheel. Old John Ballou, Steele's brother-in-law, is an easy-going, incompetent old snoozer, and by joining forces with Tolliver it will be easy to drive him off the range."

"But there's Ballou Steele," suggested Simeon.

"That no-good son of the old man, you mean?" asked Dunstan contemptuously. "What can he do to block my plans?"

"He's got a hard reputation," Weston

warned Dunstan. "He's drifted all over the West, an' the last I heard of him he was still ridin' hard an' fast. I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Dunstan, an' thet is thet no one in these parts has been so all-fired anxious to rile 'im up durin' the past few years.

"He ain't been round here very much, but wanderin' pokes driftin' through Poco has told stories about 'im. Blue Steel, they call 'im, an' they say thet he's hard as gun-metal."

"It might be best," Dunstan admitted, when the foreman ceased speaking, "not to take any chances."

"It would be best," asserted Simeon positively. "He's a fighter, if one ever lived, and if he gets back into this here neck o' the woods I reckon he'll be able to hold the Wagon Wheel ag'in' hell an' high water."

"But," said Dunstan shrewdly, "he would simply carry on the feud against Tolliver and the Lazy S, and that would all work out to our benefit."

Simeon Weston, however, shook his head.

"I've heerd tell," he said, "thet Blue Steel ain't no man's fool, an' if he does git back here he might suspect somethin'."

"In that case," said Dunstan coldly, "it might be better, much better, if he never came back. A man with a rifle concealed somewhere along the road could take care of this Blue Steel very nicely."

"Thet's what I was a-thinkin'," Weston said with a grin. "They say thet dead men don't tell no tales."

Dunstan nodded, and then, looking at his watch, he spoke to his companion.

"It's about time," he said, "for something to commence to happen."

CHAPTER IV.

THUNDERING HOOFES.

DUNSTAN looked at his watch three or four times within the next half hour.

"Funny," he said. "If the fence was cut in the right place, that would send the herd by here."

He crossed to the open window, and seemed to be listening intently.

"Hear anything?" asked Weston.

Dunstan did not answer. Then he put his head out of the window, drew it back again, and beckoned to Weston. His face wore a smile.

The eyes of Weston flashed with excitement as he joined his employer at the open window.

"Kind of a rumble," he said, grinning at Dunstan. "An' yet it cain't be thunder, now, can it—it's such a nice, starry night!"

Dunstan proved that he enjoyed the other's joke by an audible laugh. A low rumble could be heard in the distance. At first it was more a matter of vibration than of actual sound. Then it actually became a sound, not unlike the slow pealing of very distant thunder.

But as Weston had jocularly said, it was a starry night. A full moon floated high in the heavens, like a disk of polished silver; the crystalline sky about it was powdered with innumerable stars.

The sound became louder, like the reverberation of a train some distance away. It was gathering in intensity, now became a measured drumming, and now a deep and continuous roaring. Any cattleman would have recognized that ominous sound.

"Thar was nigh six thousan' head in that section," Weston said quietly, "an' I reckon they're all on the run. Ol' Tolliver 'll be fit to be tied. Them new longhorns shipped up from Texas was among 'em. Whippee! Some one's goin' to pay for this outrage, Mr. Dunstan. It's good we're in-nercent as a babe unborn, as the feller says."

Weston guffawed and smirked at his boss as the sound came rapidly nearer. "We shore got good seats to see this here show," he said.

It was quite evident that Simeon Weston thought the whole matter an uproarious joke.

The thundering of the hoofs of the stampeding cattle became louder and louder, and the earth commenced to tremble beneath the tramping of the frenzied beasts. Then, in the distance, they came into sight,

at first a big black shadow, and then the horns of the leaders could be seen outlined like shadowgraphs against the red glow that was growing stronger back toward the east where lay the Wagon Wheel ranch.

"Steele's barn's a-goin', too," Weston remarked. "He'll probably be as het up about that as ol' Tolliver 'll be about this stampede—but this 'll mean a right heavy loss to ol' Tolliver. Tarnation! Didja hear that fence go, Mr. Dunstan? You'll stan' to lose a little somethin' by this."

He referred to the fences surrounding the Dunstan acreage. When the Tolliver fences had been cut and the cattle stampeded out into the highway, they had been routed along the narrow, funnel-like road which divided the Tolliver ranch from Dunstan's Bar X. In their mad rush, the fences on both sides were, from the noise, being torn down.

"It can't be helped," said Dunstan crisply. "That was to be expected. The loss will be comparatively small for me. A chap has to spend a little money to get what he wants. Old Tolliver's cattle will be scattered all over the country. They can't possibly round up all of them after this."

The stampede swept on down the road past the Dunstan ranch house, and the building shook with the passage of the roaring herd. A tool house of the Bar X by the side of the road was leveled like so much pasteboard as the frightened beasts swept on; the thunder gradually subsided, grew weaker and weaker as the herd galloped on and on, and now could be heard the pleading lowing of steers left in the roadway, animals crushed down with broken legs, and others with their hides ripped by the barbed wire that bordered the narrow passageway.

The clip-clop of horses' hoofs sounded in the direction of the Lazy S, and in a few moments a remnant of the Tolliver outfit could be seen galloping madly along the road in an effort to round up the escaping herd.

They streaked by the Bar X ranch house, and as Dunstan continued to watch and listen he heard additional hoofbeats, and rightly surmised that this would be old Tom

Tolliver himself, roused from his bed by the stampede.

Dunstan rushed from his house and ran out into the roadway. He found the rear-guard riders to be old Tolliver, his daughter Sally, and his son Blaine, and they checked their mounts as the remittance man held up his hand.

"For the love of God," asked Dunstan, "how did such a thing happen? Come into my home, won't you? No use your going after that herd. You can wait and rest in here until your men ride by on their way back and give you a report."

"I suppose we'd better," young Blaine admitted. "Say, Dunstan, I'm in need of a drink after a night like this."

As he dismounted his horse he staggered toward the Dunstan ranch house, much to the disgust of the white-faced old Tom Tolliver and Sally Tolliver, beautiful in her rage.

"I'll make good those fences of yours that have been damaged," said old Tom Tolliver as, Sally preceding him, he walked into the comfortable living room of the Bar X ranch house.

"Indeed you will not, sir," replied Dunstan graciously. "It seems to me you have had enough trouble and expense. How could such a thing have happened. You don't suppose—"

He stopped abruptly, as if a little ashamed to suggest what might be in his mind.

"I do suppose!" came back old Tolliver, with blazing eyes. "Mr. Dunstan, I reckon I'm all het up and snappy to-night. A thing like this puts the lust to kill into my heart. It's right good of you not to demand payment for those fences. It's good to know that there's some human beings in this part of the country."

"Mr. Dunstan," he said dramatically, rising and pointing his finger at the remittance man, "there's been plenty of ornery work and trickery going on hereabouts for some time past."

"There's a man that owns a ranch not a thousand miles from here that's an hereditary enemy of mine. I've never forgotten the fact, but I've allowed the matter to die down. Through a series of depre-

dations the past few months, I have stood aloof, tried to be a Christian, and to give my neighbor the benefit of the doubt.

"This stampede to-night, though, breaks things wide open. The man that's behind all my troubles is Jeremiah Steele. All right," he added grimly, "he's had his fun; now he'll pay for the entertainment."

Old Tom Tolliver was standing there, his white goatee sticking out belligerently. "Any more forbearance on my part would be a little short of cowardice," he concluded, "and to-morrow—yes, sir—to-morrow morning, not a minute later, the day of reckoning will be at hand!"

CHAPTER V.

BUZZARDS.

OLD Jerry Steele, his face rigid and stern, stood the next morning looking at the smoking ruins of his barn. Blackie Sanderson, at his side, had an expression on his face both rueful and sympathetic. A few other hands of the Wagon Wheel, Billy Perkins among them, stood a little distance away. The atmosphere seemed charged with something expectant and ominous.

"Thar's no doubt about it," Blackie asserted. "Thet's some more o' the underhand work o' the Lazy S. Naylor, prob'ly, an' some of his men, must 'a' did the real dirty work; but I'll bet a cookie thet Tolliver himself was behind 'em. The Lazy S gang acted purty cocky last night when they was in the Corral. Like as not they was fixin' things up right then to set fire to yore barn."

"Well, there's one thing about it, Mr. Steele. They say thet thar's Lazy S cattle a-roamin' all over the country this mornin'. Thet stampede last night 'll cost Tolliver a purty penny. Three or four hundred head, they say, was killed by the barbed wire along the road, an' thar was a lotta fence rooted up an' ruined."

Steele turned on Blackie and fixed him with a penetrating stare.

"Sanderson," he asked, "did you or any of my men have anything to do with that stampede?"

The puncher regarded the old man with an expression of innocent surprise.

"I didn't, Mr. Steele," he protested. "I allus followed yore orders to leave the Lazy S alone. It was hard sometimes," he admitted, "not to try to get even with Tolliver for the dirty tricks he played on you, but I knew how you felt about it, an' I ain't tampered nohow with the Lazy S."

"But the other men?" Steele persisted, still keeping his eyes on Sanderson.

"All of 'em say they didn't have nothin' to do with it," asserted Blackie. "Beyond thet, I don't know anything about it. The hands, o' course, is all strong for you, Mr. Steele, an' they ain't been likin' the things thet have been happenin' on the Wagon Wheel."

"When water holes is poisoned an' fences cut an' mavericks rustled, an' sich like, it's hard for cow hands to keep from fightin' for their boss. They all know thet Tolliver's at the bottom o' the dirty work. Why, he must be, Mr. Steele! An' I ain't sayin' thet mebbe jest a few of 'em ain't sneakin' out once in awhile an' trying to even things up a little."

"I'd be sorry if I knew that they had," said Steele. "There was a bitter feud between the Steeles and the Tollivers back in Kentucky, for more'n a hundred years, but when Tom Tolliver an' I both happened to settle out here it seemed like we thought about the same time that it would be just as well to bring the years of bloodshed an' killin' to an end. We couldn't speak to each other, of course, but we didn't pester each other for years."

"Sometimes, Blackie, it seems to me that something's wrong about it all. Sometimes I think some one besides Tolliver might be at the bottom of the trouble. I reckon I'll go over an' have a sensible talk with Tom if he wants to listen to me."

"D'you want I should ride along with you?" asked Blackie. "'Tain't jest exactly safe, Mr. Steele, facin' Tolliver alone. He's a hot-headed hombre, an'—"

Blackie's voice trailed off in a worried note.

"I reckon, Blackie, that I can take keer o' myself," replied Steele calmly. "In

case of trouble, I got my guns, an' I figger that I can still throw 'em if I have to. But I don't reckon there'll be anything to worry about.

"Me an' Tolliver are gettin' along in years, an' I s'pose he don't want to kill me any more'n I want to kill him. Our talk, I reckon, might be peaceable enough."

So old Jerry Steele, after his horse was brought to him by Billy Perkins, flung himself into his saddle—lightly, for a man of his years—and started out in the direction of the Lazy S ranch house.

As he rode along his thoughts dwelt more on the coming return of his son than they did on the loss he had suffered through the incendiary burning of his barn and the hay it contained. His wife had been dead for years, and much of the time since she died he had been left alone.

Ballou, his boy, had started roaming the ranges when he was a youth of sixteen, although at that time, on account of his height and manly face, he passed for much older.

Nine years had passed since then, and with the exception of a few visits made in the course of his migrations, Ballou had spent them away from home.

Jeremiah Steele had known many lonesome moments, but he never intimated as much to his son. The life of Ballou, he felt, belonged to the young man, and the old rancher left him free to shape his own career.

For a long time, however, he had been looking forward to the time when his stalwart son would come home and share the tremendous responsibility of running the Wagon Wheel.

The thoughts of the old man drifted away from his son and turned to the wife that he had married back in Virginia and brought out into the Wyoming wilderness with him. What a beautiful girl she had been, with her blue-black hair and her laughing eyes! Ballou had inherited all of her color and litheness.

Times had been lean for Jeremiah Steele and his young wife at first, and he smiled to himself as he thought of their first impractical efforts to wrest a living from the country.

She had planned with him and toiled with him, and the great Wagon Wheel ranch had been built up as much through her efforts as through his own. He wondered why, in the noon of life, she had been taken by death.

He was suddenly possessed with the thought that all people must die, after an appointed span of years, so that others might enjoy for a time the rich inheritance of life.

He had been riding along slowly, his eyes cast down, while he was pondering, and now, feeling that he was becoming prey to speculations that were overmorbid, he shook his head as though to dispel them, and glanced along the road that stretched out before him.

Far in the distance he saw a rider approaching him, and it was apparent that the oncomer was maintaining a swift pace. A cloud of dust, thrown up by the swift moving hoofs of the horse, was hanging behind him.

The heart of old Jerry Steele started to thump wildly. His son Ballou was always a hard rider. It might be Ballou! Possibly Ballou had arranged to have the letter to his father mailed after he himself had started from South Dakota. It would be like Ballou to surprise his old father like that. Or the letter might have been delayed.

As the rider came nearer, however, a look of disappointment crept into Jerry Steele's face. No, this was not Ballou. It was a white horse coming toward him; Ballou's mount was always a blue-black one that had carried Ballou all over the West. If anything had ever happened to Pancho, Ballou's midnight stallion, his son would have written him about it, for the horse was a big part of Ballou's life.

The oncoming rider was screened by a fringe of timber that skirted the road at the curving, but when he emerged from the shadow of the clump of trees Jerry Steele could recognize the rider. It was Tom Tolliver, and, as he drew nearer, Steele could see that his face was bitter with hatred.

Steele reined in his mount. Tolliver, too, drew up his horse, and the two elderly men,

only a short distance apart, remained there for a moment silently facing each other.

"I was coming over to see you, Tom," said Steele in a friendly voice. "There was some questions I wanted to ask you."

Tolliver's answering voice, still tinged with a mere trace of the accent of his original Southland, fairly quivered with rage.

"And there's a few questions that I want to ask you, Steele!" he flung back. "I'm weary of your dirty depredations, suh, and I warn you that the time has come to end them!"

The face of Steele flushed red at the insult. When he spoke again his voice had none of its original softness. There was a metallic ring to it.

"Tolliver," he snapped, "I have never raised my hand against you in any way, and as one gentleman to another I ask you to apologize for that uncalled-for accusation."

"Apologize?" sneered Tolliver. "I know what you've been up to, Steele. Apologize! I'll add to my last remark, suh, and brand you as a thievin' liar!"

As he fairly spat out the words, Tom Tolliver went for his guns. At the same instant Jerry Steele's right hand reached for his holster.

Their shots rang out as one, and then for a moment all was silent.

Then Tom Tolliver, with a hole through the middle of his forehead, fell inertly into the dusty road and lay unmoving by the side of the feet of his restive horse. Steele, blood streaming down the side of his face, slumped forward in his saddle, and then slipped sidewise from his mount and down to the ground, where he too lay motionless.

The horses, frightened by the scent of blood, wheeled away from the prostrate, crumpled figures.

Moments went by, and still all was silent.

A buzzard, with its weird and morbid instinct for death, came out of nowhere and wheeled lazily around in ever decreasing circles as it drifted downward.

Then, out of a cloud of dust, which had been approaching from the eastward, a horseman appeared.

It was Blackie Sanderson, and he was riding alone.

He galloped swiftly up to the scene of the encounter between Steele and Tolliver, and then leaped lightly to the ground. He bent over Steele, who was lying on his back with his arms flung outward.

Then he went over to Tolliver, who was prone on his face, and turned his body over. After one glance at the wound in the forehead, Blackie saw that here was death. He went back to Steele again, and made a closer examination of him.

"Creased" muttered Blackie to himself as he fingered a red welt where a bullet had grazed the left temple of his employer. "Creased, that's all!"

Even as he was on his knees in the dust beside Steele, the blue eyes of the latter fluttered open. They stared uncomprehendingly for a moment, and then the light of recognition shone forth from them.

"Blackie," murmured the old man. "What— Where— Oh, yes, I remember."

Then the injured man strove to rise, but Blackie restrained him.

"You been creased along the side o' the head, Mr. Steele," he said sympathetically. "Jes' lay right whar y'are for a mite till you ain't feelin' so dizzy. I thought mebber thar'd be trouble, an' I come a-ridin' after you to help you in case you needed a friend. Jes' shet yore eyes an' rest a minute now, an' I'll be right back to you."

Steele, with a little sigh, did close his eyes and relaxed in the dusty roadway.

Blackie Sanderson went over to where the body of Tolliver was lying and picked up the gun that had fallen from the lifeless fingers of the dead man. He broke it open, and saw that there were still five unexploded shells in the gun. He stood there, for a moment and looked carefully around him in every direction. The coast was clear.

He padded softly back toward the side of Steele, whose eyes were still closed; but something intuitive must have impelled the rancher to open them at that moment. It was only for an instant—the instant of life left to Jeremiah Steele.

Blackie Sanderson, the ranch hand who had always seemed so solicitous about his employer's welfare, who had ranted the loudest of all the Wagon Wheel punchers about the behavior of the Lazy S riders, stood there with a cruel grin on his face, and a gun in his hand. There was a report, and old Jeremiah Steele's body twitched, and old Jeremiah Steele's soul passed over the borderland.

Out here, miles from the origin of the Tolliver-Steele feud, the two fiery old Southerners had died within a few feet of each other, Tolliver by the bullet of a man who had drawn in self-defense, Steele by the bullet of a treacherous and intriguing employee.

Blackie Sanderson threw the gun back to the side of its original owner, Tom Tolliver, then he sprang upon his horse and, digging his spurs into the animal's side, burned the wind back toward the Wagon Wheel ranch.

Blackie Sanderson, murderer, agent of Lafe Dunstant, and chief fomenter of trouble between the hands of the rival ranches, still wore the cruel grin upon his weather-beaten face, a grin which he would exchange for a look of outrage when he arrived at the Wagon Wheel ranch house and brought the tragic news of Steele's death by the bullet of Tom Tolliver.

Only Jeremiah Steele himself and the wheeling buzzard had seen Sanderson's treachery, and, singularly like Blackie Sanderson in basic ways, the buzzard could not, like Blackie, carry tales.

Blackie all but burst into a guffaw. Things were going as planned, and he was sitting on top of the world.

CHAPTER VI.

BLUE STEEL.

"THE Grass Widows," presented by the Burke & Burkowitz Burlesque Company, were playing that night in the little town of Lariat, a cattle center tucked away in the northeast corner of Wyoming. The various members of the tawdry aggregation were preparing, back-stage in the drafty, old-fashioned "op'ry

house," for the performance of the evening.

The manager of the troupe, Terence Burke, was out in the box office with the owner of the provincial theater. Burke was a tall, gaunt individual, who, after having been a failure as an actor, had descended the theatrical scale until he was glad of an opportunity of heading the tank-town road show. He wore a moth-eaten fur coat and a battered black felt hat which failed entirely to conceal his abundant graying hair.

"Do you think," he inquired of the theater owner, "that we will have a good house this evening?"

"Ye cain't never tell," the other responded. "Sometimes the folks turn out, an' then agin sometimes they don't. They suttinly came to the Tom show we had a coupla weeks ago."

Burke looked a little worried. He had appraised Lariat as a community that would be satisfied with about one theatrical performance a month. And he had, in one of the capacious pockets of his coat, a telegram from Sid Berkowitz, his partner back in New York, which stated that it was absolutely impossible to supply any more money under any circumstances.

This meant that Berkowitz had, in common parlance, stepped out from under the falling show, and that there would not even be car fare back to Broadway if "The Grass Widows" should become stranded.

He took out a bulky, old-fashioned silver watch, and looked at it rather pensively.

"It's seven thirty," he remarked. "They ought to be coming along pretty soon. I'm going back-stage for a minute. I'll return shortly."

He left the box office, walked back through the small and gloomy auditorium, and found himself in the wings. A couple of Lariat loafers, assisted by two of the male members of the troupe, were just finishing the erection of the one overornate set which was carried by the company. It was known as a center door fancy set, and was done in bright vermillion, tricked out copiously with gold and silver roses.

"All set, Gus?" Burke asked the taller one of his men, who nodded morosely.

"How does it look, Terry?" he asked.

His smaller companion paused and listened as Burke replied.

"It don't look like anything yet," Burke replied. "Of course it's not quite time for the audience to come. There's a few boys hanging around outside the theater," he added hopefully.

He then turned away and strolled back to a row of little dressing rooms, and, without knocking, opened one of the doors and walked in. An expansive woman of forty or more was in the room making up in front of a cracked and wavy mirror. She was wearing nothing but lingerie, and her appearance was grotesque and somewhat repellent.

Her plump cheeks had been well whited, and in the right places liberally daubed with rouge. Her hair had been blondined, and it contrasted oddly with the snapping black eyes that she turned on Burke.

"Well?" she exclaimed, after he had closed the door behind him. Then, after staring at him somewhat contemptuously for a moment, she added: "What do you want now?"

"I just came back, dear," he told her placatingly, "to see if everything is all right."

"To see if everything's all right?" she mimicked sarcastically. "Why, of course everything's all right. Here we are, nearly stranded out where there's nothing but hicks and hills, and you come back to see if everything's all right!"

"All right!" she exclaimed again. "Why I ever married you, I don't know. You were going to make a great actress out of me, and all that. And look where I am. Lawd! If I ever see Broadway again I'll know better than to ever go more than a block away from it. G'wan, now! Beat it out of my dressing room and lemme alone!"

"But, my dear!" protested Terence Burke. "You know I'm doing the best that I can."

"Then try doing your worst for a little while!" shouted the woman, irately stamping her foot on the floor and shaking a pudgy fist at him. "The more you try to do your best, the worse off we get!"

"Hush, now, Lily," the old Thespian pleaded. "Every one will hear you carrying on this way."

"Hush nothing!" cried Lily. "What do I care what every one knows? G'wan out of here, and for Heaven's sake lemme alone before I throw something at you."

"All right, Lily, all right!" Burke said placatingly, retiring toward the exit and keeping his eyes on her while he fumbled for the doorknob behind him.

Finding it, he opened the door quickly, and whirled around and found refuge out in the corridor.

"Gosh, they're at it again!" exclaimed one of the two girls who were making up in an adjoining dressing room. "It's kind of a shame the way Lily picks on Terry all the time. He's a good old guy, but somehow he don't seem to get the breaks."

The young woman who expressed her sympathy for old Burke was a buxom, vivacious-appearing girl who was scantily attired in tights and a very abbreviated ballet skirt. She was sitting in a chair, and, reaching over to the dressing table, she picked up a pair of gaudy red garters.

"Gee!" she added. "I hope Terry's got enough dough to buy some more garters to throw out to the hicks. There's only a few pairs left in stock."

She slipped them up over her knees, and then looked at the other girl, who had maintained a moody silence.

"Hey, there, Betty," she said good-naturedly, "cheer up! Smile a little! The show isn't dead yet; so there's no use of the ingénue going into mourning."

A faint smile came to the face of the ingénue, who was a decidedly pretty girl with real blond hair, and blue eyes that just then seemed a little weary.

"I'm so sick of it all, Cherry," replied Betty dejectedly. "I wish I had never got stage-struck. I wish I had never seen New York."

"Maybe you never will again," laughed Cherry. "We're a long way from Broadway, kid, and the walking ain't any too good."

The younger girl was silent for a moment, in spite of the infectious good nature of her companion. There was a suspicion

of moisture in her eyes, and Cherry went to Betty and put an arm around her.

"The trouble is, Betty," she said, "that you're not hard enough for this sort of life. And then again, you're too new to it and too young to stand it. But, cheer up, kid! Maybe some big rancher 'll fall for you and give you a wedding ring and a cottage with roses climbing the veranda, and all that stuff you read about and never hope to get."

"You're a peach, Cherry," the younger girl said, "and you've been very decent to me. But you can't cheer me up to-night, and there's no use trying. I'm tired and worn out, that's all."

Terence Burke, after leaving the dressing room of Lily, his wife, had gone back to the box office. It was nearing eight o'clock now, and the performance was scheduled to commence at eight fifteen. A few people had straggled through the little lobby, but it began to appear as if the population of Lariat was not going to turn out in any great numbers to be entertained by "The Grass Widows."

"I reckon it's an off night," said the owner of the theater complacently. He already had pocketed his guarantee, and he always maintained the philosophical attitude of a gambler toward such additional earnings as he might derive from percentage. Burke's face fell a little, the furrows in his aging cheeks became a little deeper and more drawn, and his faded blue eyes had the haunted look of a cornered animal.

Just then there came down the lobby the sound of hilarious laughter and the clicking of the high-heeled boots that cow-punchers wear. Then a bow-legged, tan-faced young fellow swaggered up to the wicket and looked in with a grinning face.

"Lo, Steve," he said to the owner of the theater. "Gi' me six box seats to the show. I'm givin' a little party to-night, Steve; sorta steppin' out into sassiety, as the feller says."

There was an undercurrent of mirth in his attitude as he took out a roll of bills, and, peeling off a twenty-dollar gold certificate, shoved it through the window. The lackadaisical owner of the Elite Theater

pushed out the tickets and then reached for the cash drawer to make change. "Y' know, Steve," continued the purchaser, "a real ol' friend an' employee o' mine rode into town this afternoon. Maybe yo' remember him. When he was gallivantin' hereabouts they used to call him Blue Steel."

"Blue Steel!" exclaimed the man in the box office. "Has he returned to Lariat agin?"

"He shore has," the other replied; "but he's not here for permanent. He's jes' ridin' through on his way home, an' me an' the boys figger on entertainin' him this evenin'."

Then the squat little fellow picked up his change and walked over and joined a group of mirthful cow-pokes that were laughing together on the other side of the lobby.

The owner of the theater was silent for a moment, and then he looked at Burke with a queer smile.

"Know who that guy is?" he asked. "Well, course you don't. That's Bowleg Bowers. He don't know a hull lot, but he owns a ranch worth near a quarter of a million dollars, an' he likes to spend money an' have a good time."

He paused a moment to sell some more tickets, for a great many people seemed to be strolling in on the heels of the six roisterers who had disappeared in the opera house.

"An' this Blue Steel that he spoke about," continued the theater owner at a moment when there was no one at the window, "don't you know who he is, pard? Course you don't. Well, he's the biggest hell raiser that ever was—that's who he is," he asserted positively.

Then in the box office there was no more time for conversation, for the lobby commenced to swarm with grinning people.

"I hear thar's goin' to be an extra good show to-night," chuckled one freckle-faced lad as he stuck his face up to the wicket. "Us cow-nurses wouldn't miss this here performance, not for nothin', Steve."

He passed on, and a long succession of grinning faces appeared at the box office window in the next few minutes. The rush

was so great that at eight fifteen every seat in the house was taken, and standing room only was being sold to gawky cow hands at the rate of fifty cents a head.

But one of the customers was not the least gawky. He was a tall, wide-shouldered young man, dressed all in blue!

His name was Blue Steel.

CHAPTER VII.

A SHOW-UP AND A SHOW-DOWN.

THERE was an air of expectancy in the Elite Theater that evening when, after the local six-piece orchestra had played a Sousa march, the curtain went up and revealed the chorus of "The Grass Widows" lined up across the stage.

The advertised "bevy of beautiful girls" was made up of eight superannuated chorus ladies who might possibly have seen better days in the remote past. As soon as the rising curtain revealed them, the orchestra blared forth into strains of the opening chorus of the show, and the "girls" performed various military evolutions while they bawled out the words of a light ditty.

There was a moment of silence after the last one of them, at the conclusion of the song, had disappeared into the wings. The eyes of most of the people in the house were turned in the direction of the box that was occupied by Bowlegs Bowers and his party.

Then the six occupants of the box commenced to applaud vociferously, laughing among themselves as they did so, and the rest of the audience followed their lead. The theater fairly reverberated with the clapping of calloused hands, and in response to the encore the chorus soon appeared again.

"They seem to like the chorus," said Burke optimistically to the owner of the theater.

"Yeah?" replied the other dryly. "Well, it's a little too early to say jest what they like."

On the stage the chorus was coming out again, and this time, after an entrance that had been built up for her, Lily Burke

pranced out and was picked up by a spotlight.

"I am a merry, merry, merry widow-w-w—
A merry, merry widow-w am I,"

she sang in a rather husky soprano voice.

There was silence while she was singing the song, for the six men in the upper right-hand box were quiet. She progressed toward the finish of the song, and finally concluded:

"And so I'm a merry, merry widow-w-w—
Oh, a mayree widow am I-I-I."

All eyes turned on the men in the box, and for a moment there was a deep silence throughout the house. Then Bowlegs Bowers rose a little unsteadily to his feet and loudly, but very deliberately, remarked to an acquaintance in the box that was opposite him on the other side of the house:

"I reckon, Shorty, that her husband must be right glad that he's daid, don't you?"

The house broke into mighty guffaws of laughter, and then, imitating the six men in the box, started to applaud riotously.

Burke, in the meantime, had made his way back-stage, arriving there just in time to face his wife after she had heard from the wings the remark of Bowlegs. Her hard face was harder than ever as she glared at Burke, who also heard the deep voice of Bowers booming through the theater, and who knew, only too well, what it portended.

He smiled at his severe spouse with a rather uncertain look in his eyes.

"It looks, Lily," he said, "as though they were here to razz us to-night. Well, they've paid their money for it, and—"

"If they try to razz me, the low-lived bums," Lily interrupted bitterly, "they'll see how far they'll get! I'm tired of being made a fool of."

"Now, Lily," commenced Burke suavely, "you've got to expect a little of that, and—"

"Yes," she snapped. "That's just what you would say. You—"

But her indignation got the better of her, and she turned her back on her husband and walked toward her dressing room, leav-

ing him standing there rather helplessly alone. Burke took off his old hat and ran his fingers through his hair.

He felt a hand laid on one of his shoulders, and a cheerful voice whispered in his ear:

"Never mind, Terry; they're out to razz us to-night, but I'm going to razz them back."

Burke turned around and saw Cherry standing there with a smile on her face. He had no time to reply, for Cherry had already been given her cue and had bounded out onto the stage, where she found that, despite her determination to give as much as was sent, this audience at Lariat was a hard audience to razz back at. And it proved harder and harder as time went on.

Guided by the boisterous and half intoxicated Bowlegs Bowers, who was aided and abetted by his guests, the evening was nothing short of a Roman holiday.

Cherry fared better than the other members of the cast, as there was a certain indifference and even nonchalance about her. She had been endowed with a sense of humor, and the hard years that she had experienced had made her capable of coping with hard people. Lily Burke, however, became more and more outraged as the show continued, and seemed near the breaking point.

There was one other member of the cast near to the breaking point, but in an entirely different way. It was the ingénue, Betty, who was new to the life she was leading. Her very undertone of timidity and her evident responsiveness to the railery of the audience led the careless gibbers to intensify their cruel fun.

There were tears in her eyes when she made her exit after her first song, but she smiled through them at Burke and Cherry, who were standing in the wings together.

"Don't let 'em bother you, kid," said Cherry. "Take what they hand you and laugh at 'em. It's the only way—laugh at 'em—it's all you can do."

"The brutes!" exclaimed Betty. "They ought to be ashamed of themselves."

The next time Betty had gone on the stage she had tried to follow the advice

of Cherry, but she lacked the harder surface of the latter. Her vision was filled with grimacing, mocking faces, and she turned in desperation from the body of the theater and looked up to one of the boxes.

She saw, in one of them, an unsmiling face that seemed to have some sympathy in it, sympathy for her. It was a dark face that was crowned with waving black hair, and Betty's eyes kept wandering back to it as she sang.

She felt almost sure that, as she was singing, he at last smiled encouragingly down at her, and this made her feel a little more certain of herself. Her eyes clung to him, and she thought she saw him turn and speak to the little grizzled man at his side, the squat fellow who appeared to be so drunk and who seemed to be the most troublesome one in the theater.

Then the handsome, black-eyed young man looked back at her again; she thought she detected a certain compassionate look in his eyes.

The first part of the performance was concluded, and the second part well under way when Cherry, the soubrette, sang her garter song. The feature of the number, of course, was her removal of the garters which she wore especially for the occasion, and the tossing of them into the audience.

Most of the disturbance that had occurred throughout the evening had had its inception in the box where the six turbulent characters were sitting, and Cherry, believing that it would be good policy to placate the ribald crew that occupied it, tossed one of her red garters up to them.

Bowlegs Bowers nearly fell out of the box in his successful attempt to catch it, and the house applauded wildly.

Cherry's number was followed by a scene in which the entire company took part, but which was featured by the rendition of a sentimental ballad by Lily Burke. The song was entitled "With Every Rose There Is a Thorn," and Lily was rendering it with a voice that fairly quavered with emotion. It was, in its way, a song that Lily liked. It rang true to her, she believed in the sentiment it expressed, and the number was the big moment of the show for her.

The audience listened in silence, for the disturbers in the box were keeping quiet. Then there came an outburst of chuckles from the various parts of the house, for Bowlegs Bowers, it could be seen, had stretched the red garter, slung-shot fashion, over two fingers of his left hand, and he was standing up pulling it back and forth with a crooked finger of his other hand.

Then he was seen to reach into his cartridge belt and draw forth a forty-five shell, which he carefully adjusted in his improvised but efficient weapon.

"With every rose there is a thorn,
With every plea-sure, pain-n."

As Lily lingeringly and almost lovingly drew out the last words of the ballad, she slowly pirouetted around until her back, as she turned, was to the Bowers box. Just then Bowlegs let fly the shell that was in his sling, and Lily leaped into the air with all the power but none of the grace of a Pavlova.

The song ended abruptly, and she turned, her face distorted with rage, on the audience which was now rocking with convulsions of laughter. She stood there speechless, trembling with anger. And then her overwrought nerves failed her, and she did the unexpected thing. She broke down and cried, and walked off the stage, an abject and defeated figure.

Betty, standing close to her, was swept with indignation, and hardly knowing what she did, she stepped up to the flickering gas footlights.

"You low-lived, miserable cowards!" she said in a voice that was low but vibrant. "You call yourselves men, and yet you pick on a helpless woman until you drive her hysterical. Here we are, trying to make a living, trying to entertain you, trying to do the best we can, which is all that anybody can do.

"Why don't you give us a chance? Because," she added, "you're a lot of ignorant, heartless rubes, that's why!" She stood there with flashing eyes, before a theater full of men who seemed, at that moment, to be rather ashamed of themselves and who were moving restlessly in their seats.

Then Betty, too, felt her courage seeping swiftly away, and her eyes filled with tears, and her lips commenced to tremble. She was about to turn away and run back into the wings, when she heard some one land on the stage close to her side. She turned and saw that it was the young man who had been looking at her from the box.

Apparently he had leaped to the stage from where he had been sitting. She saw that he was dressed in blue, and that his hair and eyes were so black that they seemed to have blue glints in them. His spurs and the exposed parts of his guns were of the same color.

"Boys," she heard him say in a soft, drawling voice, "I reckon it's just as the little gal says. It ain't right, the thing we have been doin' to-night. Thar ain't one of us here who would spur a hoss until it went loco, an' yet that's just what we been doin' to-night.

"Not to hosses, either, but to people who are doin' what they can to make a livin'." It was," he added, "a right ornery thing to do, and as for me, I'm mighty sorry I had anything to do with it. An' if you-all will think it over for just a minute, I reckon you'll agree with me. An'," he continued, as he seemed to become more tense, "if there's any one here who don't, I'm here to reckon with him now."

There was a chorus of cheers and approving yells from the audience.

"Yo're right, Blue!" came shouts from every side. "Yo're right!"

"An' I'd suggest," continued the young man, "that we sorta make up for what we've done by makin' a little voluntary contribution to our good friends here. You waddies have all got strong arms, an' you all got money in yore pockets. Let's see you toss a little of it in this here direction."

Hands throughout the audience went into well-lined pockets, and a shower of gold and silver commenced to rain down on the stage.

At the height of the demonstration, however, there was a sound of disturbance off-stage, and Lily, her face distorted with passion, came tramping out from the wings. She was dragging with her old Burke, who

was trying to restrain her, but once on the stage he broke his grip on her and let her go. Driven by hysteria, Lily faced the audience and started into a ribald tirade.

"I don't know," she screamed, "why I ever cried for a bunch of cattle like you. I ain't crying now," she added. "I'm standing here and telling you cheap skates that we've got your money and that's all we wanted.

"Now," she continued venomously, "get the hell out of here, because this show's at an end right now. We've got your money in the box office, and that's what we came here for—to touch up the pockets of you suckers. To-morrow, thank Gawd, we'll be out of this hick town and away from you cheap, ignorant bums!"

But just then the disheveled figure of the old theater owner came rushing from the wings.

"Sheriff!" he yelled. "Yo're in here somewhars. A masked man jest held up the box office, sheriff, an' stole all the money thet was out thar. He jest galloped away, an' mebbe it ain't too late to catch him!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SILENT WATCHES.

BLACKIE'S raven message which he carried to the Wagon Wheel ranch house with all the mannerisms of a chief mourner seemed fairly to numb the sensibilities of Jeremiah Steele's retainers, who had looked upon death in divers violent forms.

The body of old Jeremiah was brought back to the ranch in a Canastoga wagon and laid out in the big room upstairs, and there were tears in the eyes of many a hard, fighting face that looked upon the dead chief of the Wagon Wheel.

John Ballou, the dead man's mild-mannered brother-in-law, found himself temporarily in charge of the Wagon Wheel. He closely examined the letter that had arrived the day before from the wandering Blue Steel. The smudged postmark veiled the name of the town from which the letter had been mailed. Only the "S. D." indi-

cated that the fiery lad was somewhere in South Dakota.

"We might be able to reach him along the way by a telegraph," Blackie suggested. "Thar's only one way he's likely to come. He'll be out o' the Black Hills region 'fore this, an' I'd say he'd been scootin' along the northern border o' Wyoming mebbe as far as Sheridan, an' then turn south, or like as not follow along the Powder River trail."

"The letter says he's due here Thursday," John Ballou offered hopefully. "If we could only reach him before the funeral—"

"I'll do all in my power to fix things," said the hypocritical Blackie. "I got a real idee. I'll ride down to Davy Dibble's an' git a look at that thar postal guide o' hisn. Them towns along the Powder River is all small. We'll telegraph the sheriff or deputy in each town, an' that 'll likely have 'em pick up Blue when he comes through an' give 'im the sad news.

"For I reckon no one 'd make any mistake in reco'nizin' a hombre like Blue Steel. He looks diff'rent from anybody else. He's a right han'some lad, an' a crackin' dresser."

Blackie's tricky suggestion was approved by the unsuspecting John Ballou, and accordingly Blackie mounted his roan and set off toward Poco alone. It was the very liberty that he desired at this time. He felt somewhat uncomfortable around the Wagon Wheel with old Jerry lying dead upstairs, and he had an additional reason for wanting to ride away with no companions.

He made a quick gallop into town, and with Maw Dibble's eager assistance sent out a few telegrams. He stopped in for a drink at the Corral Saloon. It was practically deserted, except by a few town loungers.

The punchers of the Wagon Wheel and of the Lazy S were all back on their respective ranches to-day. As he turned into the cross trail that led by the Bar X on his way back to his own ranch, he noticed three riders coming slowly down the street. He made them out as Simeon Weston, Dunstan's foreman, Dan Naylor of the

Lazy S, and the third slouching figure was easily recognizable as Blaine Tolliver.

Blackie did not stop. He realized that Weston and Naylor were in all probability egging the weak Tolliver scion on to something, and since he, Blackie Sanderson, was supposed by Blaine to be a loyal member of the Wagon Wheel outfit, it might not be the proper time to face Blaine. Besides, he had some news that he wanted to tell Lafe Dunstan very privately.

He reached the clump of trees at the roadway leading to Dunstan's Bar X ranch house, and left his horse in the shelter of the remains of the tool house which had been practically destroyed by the stampede of Tolliver's cattle, but which would screen his horse in the gathering darkness from the roadway. Dunstan's Jap servant ushered him into the presence of Dunstan, who was sitting before the fire in a deep leather chair.

After a generous drink of whisky Blackie looked at the back of the retiring Oriental, and sat down next to Dunstan. There was no need for any acting or posing with the latter. He was eager to show the remittance man that he had a valuable retainer in himself.

He related how he had come upon the creased Jeremiah Steele, and had furthered Dunstan's plans by "puttin' the ol' man outa his misery," as he phrased it.

Dunstan was jubilant and duly appreciative, and Blackie felt great pride in standing forth as such a heroic figure before this strange and ruthless breed of man who paid well for good service.

He learned that Blaine Tolliver, the son of old Tim, had sworn vengeance against the Steeles for the death of his father, but that he was making his grief a chance for some intensive drinking.

"He may be in here a little later this evening," said Dunstan. "He's acting exactly the way I should expect him to act. Simeon Weston rode over to the Lazy S to drop in as a mark of respect to old Tolliver. He said he'd try to have a talk with Blaine. If Simeon talks to him, he'll put some ideas into his head."

"I saw 'em as I rode outa Poco," Blackie informed Dunstan. "Dan was with 'em."

"Then it won't be very difficult now to work out all our plans. Simeon and Dan will handle him very nicely. Yes, things are coming fine, Blackie. I'm lucky to have chaps like you in with me. Have another drink."

Blackie had another, and still another, and was in good spirits when the bell of the ranch house tinkled and a minute later the Oriental led in Simeon Weston and Dan Naylor.

The latter grinned over at Sanderson.

"We come mighty near startin' somethin' down at the Corral last night, didn't we, pard?" he asked. "Ef Sheriff Reynolds hadn't sorta happened in, thar'd 'a' been a good free-for-all. Wal, things is workin' out mighty nice as it is, with them two ol' men knocked off."

"Blackie could tell you something about that, and it would make your hair stand up," smiled Dunstan; and before Blackie could stop him, the remittance man had let the two ranch hands in on Sanderson's murder of his employer.

Blackie was not keen enough to know that Dunstan had told it deliberately, so that some one else would hear him make the admission—that Dunstan was already laying plans to get rid of himself and the other two men who were in the room.

All that would come in good time, Dunstan thought. Secretly he had contemptuous thoughts of these three rough characters, Weston, Naylor, and Sanderson, who had the instincts of beasts and the minds of children. When the right hour struck it would not be difficult for a seasoned man of the world to outwit them.

"I suppose you left Blaine at the Corral?" he said to Weston.

"Right, Mr. Dunstan," replied Simeon Weston. "We left 'im soppin' up red-eye with a couple o' no-accounts down thar, an' makin' threats ag'in' the Steele ranch."

"In other words," smiled Dunstan, "doing exactly what we should like him to do. With chaps like you and Dan here, things will be easy. Of course, the man to ambush this Blue Steel chap should be Blaine. He'd be understood to have a motive, and the shooting would be passed up rather quickly."

"Blaine Tolliver! To shoot up Blue Steel! I knowed you wanted him worked up, Mr. Dunstan, but we'd need a real man for that job, some hombre like Blackie here," he added, much to Sanderson's discomfort. "Y' ain't got so much knowledge o' this Blue Steel, Mr. Dunstan.

"He's a hard feller. Blaine 'd last about as long with him as a fresh Mex at a punchers' picnic. Thar ain't no sense in sendin' a jack-rabbit after a wolf, Mr. Dunstan."

"Do you know, I really fancy that there is, though, in this case," Dunstan insisted. "At least, Blaine knows the country around here, and he can use a gun. Besides, he won't take any unnecessary chances, if I know Blaine, and knowing him is very simple.

"He'll know the rock or clump of trees to hide behind, and a bullet in the heart from Blaine Tolliver can be just as deadly, Simeon, as it could be from—well, from Blackie, here, or some man that is a man."

"I reckon you're right, Mr. Dunstan," Blackie was willing to admit. He was none too eager to tangle with Blue Steel.

"I'd wager thet Blaine 'd be the one to git the bullet in the heart," argued Simeon Weston. "It's a fifty to one shot—up ag'in' Blue Steel."

"Well," returned Dunstan, with his cold smile, "what then? Wouldn't be a bad development, that—what? Another Tolliver out of the way. Only the girl left. And this sheriff chap, Reynolds, is quite businesslike. We could egg him on and maybe prove that this Blue Steel was the one who had ambushed Blaine."

"It 'd be right hard to prove," said Weston. "I ain't got no love for Blue Steel. He got the drop on me once in the Corral, and made me look a mite foolish. But folks hereabouts wouldn't believe that he ambushed nobody. He jest don't do things thet way."

"At any rate," Dunstan summed up, "we have everything to gain by feeding this propaganda to Blaine. We shall get one tally out of it one way or the other, and maybe two. Now, you say this Blue Steel is due here about Thursday, Blackie?"

"Thursday mawnin', I figures," replied Blackie. "Mebbe even a leetle afore, if any o' them telegraphs reaches him. Course, they won't. I'd almost guarantee he won't get as far west as the towns I had telegraphed.

"He'll keep away from the Powder River—he's been in all sorts o' shootin's an hellin's up thar, jest lives on trouble an' excitement, an' he'll be wantin' to make time.

"He's more likely to slant down an' not pick up the Powder at all. Lariat an' Trinchera Creek an' them towns 'll be the ones he picks up, if he don't dodge the towns altogether, which same is likely."

"Now," said Dunstan, eager to get his plans formed before too much liquor had been consumed, "this is where you come in, Naylor. Blackie can't show-up in this, of course, and Weston and myself must naturally be off the board entirely. You, as a retainer of Tom Tolliver, must keep crying for vengeance of some sort.

"You'll find that Blaine won't hear about anybody but himself being the man to go out and get this Blue Steel. He's brave enough, at that, something of old Tolliver in him, if he is a wastrel and a fool.

"When he gets sobered up to-morrow, keep working on him. Tell him to keep his plans under cover. His sister, Miss Sally, has a stronger will than he has, and if she knew too much she might prevail upon him to desist, in some way. The news is pretty well circulated now about this Blue Steel's homecoming Thursday. When is Tolliver's funeral?"

"Wednesday," answered Naylor. "Ol' Tom 'll be planted side o' his missus in the Poco buryin' ground, 'bout two in the afternoon, I reckon. Miss Sally has made out all the plans.

"Golly, but thar's a thoroughbred! No tears, although every one knows how much she thought o' the ol' man. She's a-goin' about a leetle pale an' pinched, an' no one knows what's happenin' back o' them gray eyes o' hers."

"Well, boys," said Dunstan, "we had better break this up now. Simeon and I will see you at Tolliver's funeral to-morrow, Dan. Blackie, you might get a chance to

lope over here to-morrow night. But don't take any unnecessary chances. Things are going very nicely as it is."

Less than an hour later Blackie Sander-son was hopefully telling mild old John Ballou of the telegrams that had been dispatched, one of which would be likely to reach Blue Steel.

No cow hand left the domains of the Wagon Wheel on the following day, although it was pay day at the Wagon Wheel and old John Ballou paid off each man. The next day following was Wednesday, when old Tom Tolliver was buried in the little Poco cemetery, and most of the country except the Wagon Wheel ranch turned out.

They would do the same at Jeremiah Steele's obsequies—that is, all except the Lazy S outfit. Both Tolliver and Steele had been highly respected and admired in the community.

As dawn of Thursday arrived, and Blue Steel had still failed to put in an appearance, John Ballou gave out the information that Jeremiah's funeral would start from the ranch house at ten o'clock. Evidently the telegrams had failed to reach the wandering scion of the Steele family; or perhaps, it was thought by some, Blue Steel had got himself into some other scrape, or had gone wandering away on some new adventure.

There was not a single snicker on Thursday morning when Sam Latham, Poco's one undertaker, who also sold bull-rakes and ranching machinery, alighted from his buggy at the Wagon Wheel wearing a tall silk hat.

At other times the hands of certain Wagon Wheel waddies might itch to lasso that tall and imposing tile. The dignity of death enwrapped the Wagon Wheel this day.

There was no conversation, nor any smoking of wheatstraws as the mounted cavalcade passed along the road to Poco in the rear of old Jerry Steele's body.

Lafayette Dunstan and most of the neighbors were in attendance, as they had been in attendance at the Tolliver funeral the day before. Sheriff Reynolds was on hand in the double capacity of mourner

and official. It was unlikely, but still just possible, that something might happen as the Wagon Wheel outfit rode by the acreage of the Lazy S.

But nothing did happen. The followers gathered at the cemetery, and Jeremiah's body was laid beside that of Sally Ballou Steele, who had died some years before.

The Corral Saloon was passed by on the return trip without so much as a glance in its direction. The Wagon Wheel boys knew how to honor their dead. It was a day of sorrow and silence—almost of ominous silence.

CHAPTER IX.

NEWS FROM POCO.

BLUE STEEL was of that tribe of men whom adventure seems to follow and whose very presence seems to breed excitement. Things happened when Blue Steel was around.

Possibly the holdup of the Elite Opera House box office would have occurred anyhow that night, but, as it happened, things had been slow in Lariat for months. The last great excitement had struck Lariat at the time Blue Steel had left town, months before.

The Big Horn Express had been held up on that occasion near Lariat Gorge, a few miles above the town of Lariat, and it had been Blue Steel who had brought the bandits to justice, heading the band of riders which combed the hills north of the town. And now, on the very day of his return, things started popping again.

The lone bandit who had cashed in on the capacity house of the luckless "Grass Widows" by the simple expedient of sticking his six-gun in the box office man's face had backed across the wooden sidewalk to the roadway, and vaulting into the saddle of his waiting horse, had galloped along the little main street of the town and headed north toward the region where, especially at night, he might elude any possible pursuers and make a complete get-away toward the Black Hills by morning.

It was evident that the men of Lariat,

despite their irritating conduct in the Elite, had their hearts in the right place. Every man with a horse stood ready to join the sheriff and his deputies in trailing the lone bandit and trying to recover the money of the "Grass Widows" company.

Blue Steel was one of the first to volunteer. Something of the hopeless situation of the tawdry little road company had been sensed by the warm-hearted young puncher. He noted the lines of despair in the gaunt old face of Terence Burke, who, until the news of the holdup, had thought that luck had turned at last.

"Don't worry too much thar, stranger," said Steel, as he came out of the theater and saw Burke brooding in the lobby. "I reckon you-all will git yore money back. The sheriff an' twelve men's on his trail already, an' we're collectin' a few other citizens front o' the post office for another posse to ride to the east o' the town an' make a j'inin' with them boys north o' Lariat Gorge."

"It's very good of you," said Burke. "I can see that you are all good fellows at heart. This proves it. I hope you won't mind what—that lady said from the stage, all that talk about being bums, and so on."

Blue Steel laughed. "Aw, that was all right. I reckon we wasn't any too gallant," he admitted. "But jumpin' c'yotes, I shore would hate to be the husband o' that ol' gal; I would shore!"

Terence Burke flushed, and made haste to change the subject.

"Lord! I hope you manage to catch that fellow and get back that dough for me," he said. "We've had some tough breaks in this troupe."

"Don't you worry, stranger," called back Blue Steel, for he was already halfway through the lobby on his way to the little main street. Burke followed his slender figure as Steel reached the street, bounded onto the back of his big blue-black stallion, and started to lope up Main Street to join the gathering grouped about the post office.

"A very fine-looking fellow, that," he observed to a loungeer looking at one of the lurid posters pasted up in the lobby. "I

suppose he's one of your prominent men here in Lariat."

The loungeer ejected a stream of tobacco juice on the lobby floor, and smiled a stained smile.

"Thet hombre's a right prominent citizen lots o' places," he replied. "He's a hellion in some ways, Blue Steel is, an' a darn good feller in others. He shore is."

"What did you call him?" asked Burke. "What was that name again?"

"Blue Steel," replied the loungeer. "Lor' sakes! Ain't y'e've'r heerd tell o' Blue Steel? He's one o' the best known leather-whackers in these parts."

But Burke was already hustling out of the lobby and making his way up the little main street toward the post office where several mounted men were all but ready to depart on what might be an all-night quest.

"Blue Steel!" he yelled. "Say, just a minute there! I want to tell you something."

Blue Steel guided his big stallion toward the sidewalk. "Me?" he asked. "What is it thar, stranger?"

"I suppose I should have recognized you from the description," said Burke. "I'm afraid my mind was on something else—on that cash stolen from the box office, to be exact. I just learned that you are Blue Steel."

"You shore are right thar, stranger," was the reply. "I ain't had occasion to change my name yet. It's a name I'm right proud of."

"Then I may have a message that will be news to you," Burke informed him. "Did you, by any chance, receive a telegram in the last day or so?"

"Telegram?" Blue Steel laughed. "I ain't long enough in one place, stranger, to get no telegrams. Why?"

Terence Burke paused a moment. He seemed to be wondering whether to deliver the full message, or not. "Because," he replied, "last night we played in Mesa Verde, over in Sheridan County near the Powder River."

"Just before the performance, the sheriff of the town had me make an announcement from the stage. He said he had a

telegram for a man named Blue Steel, believed to be around that part of the country. It was a message from Poco, Wyoming.

"The sheriff was trying to locate you. He said that something very important had happened at your home back near Poco, and that your presence was desired there at once. He thought that by chance you might be in the house, or that some one there might know of your whereabouts."

"It's shore news to me," said Blue Steel, whose mind wandered back to the Wagon Wheel and the neighboring ranch, the Lazy-S. "Golly! I wonder what's happened back there?"

"Thanks a heap, stranger, for the news, although it ain't likely to be any good news a callin' me back to Poco. That makes things different! I reckon thar's enough cow-pokes here to git after this lone bandit without me, under the circumstances. Reckon I'd better start trailin' back to Poco. Hey, thar, Bowie Bell!"

Bowie Bell was the deputy who had just ridden up and was about to lead the second posse away. Blue Steel briefly explained the news he had received from Burke.

"Then you don't want to be forkin' no cayuse up north," was Bell's advice. "We got plenty o' men without yo', anyhow, Blue."

"Is that Powder River local on the same schedule?" asked Blue Steel. "Golly! I hate to wait till mornin' to start, an' I hate to kill this hoss o' mine on a fast ride o' that distance."

"Yes, it. don't leave here till close to noon to-morrer, Blue. But say! Thar's the Big Horn express goes through at ten forty-two."

"Don't stop, though, does it, Bowie?"

"It don't, ordinary," replied Bowie Bell. "But Lor' sakes! I reckon thet train-crew o' the Big Horn express ain't forgettin' Blue Steel. They'd like to bein skeletons by this time, 'count o' that hold-up, only for you. I reckon Sims Halliday, the station master, might flag it for you."

"It 'll take yo' as far as Powder River, an' then it heads up toward the Big Horn

country. But the rest o' the trip wouldn't be much for a hombre with a hoss like your'n. See Sims Halliday, Blue. We gotta be lopin' on."

Rather regretfully, Blue Steel saw the second posse get away without him, and then rode down to the little station to see Sims Halliday, station master and general storekeeper.

"They may be plumb soreheads—but I'll do it!" promised Halliday. "I shore will, Blue, if I lose my danged ol' job for it. Thet train won't git by here without stoppin' ef I have to wreck it."

"An' I jest gotta take my hoss," Blue Steel told him. "I gotta mighty smart ride ahead o' me down along the Powder River after I git off the train, an' the hoss for that ride is Pancho. You do what you can to help me, Sims. I'll pay any damages."

"You don't worry 'bout no damages, Blue. Jest be here with your hoss aroun' ten thirty."

With a wait of nearly an hour before him, Blue Steel wandered back to the Elite Theater to talk further with Terence Burke. But the soft-hearted old thespian pretended ignorance of the specific news in the telegram, although he knew it. "I'm glad you're getting a chance to get out to-night," he said. "I imagine that telegraphic message might have been very important."

"I'm right glad Sims is flaggin' that train," said Blue. "I could make it in a night an' a day o' hard ridin' with that hoss o' mine, but I ain't no hoss-killer. Y'see that thar hoss o' mine, stranger? That's the best hoss in Wyoming an' points West. Nothin' 'ud stop that thar quadruped, nothin' less'n breakin' a laig."

Burke was about to make a response when the surly-faced Lily came up behind him. "Yeh, you're standing here doing nothing, as usual!" she told her henpecked spouse. "A fine manager *you* are! A fine match I made when I married you!"

Burke colored up at this disclosure of his secret, remembering the young puncher's words of a few moments before. "This is Mr. Steel, Lily," he said. "My wife, Mrs. Burke, Mr. Steel."

"Pleased to meetcha, ma'am," Blue Steel acknowledged, removing his blue sombrero. "I was a sayin' to your husband, ma'am, that I reckon these boys'll rope that c'yote that slunk away with the money."

"They'd better!" Lily sniffed. "Say," she added, turning on Blue Steel, "I remember you, sitting up in that box. Ain't you guys ashamed of yourselves? The idea! Riding us poor women for trying to give you a good show."

"I might say as how we are, ma'am," replied Blue. "Say, miss, I'm mighty sorry to hear o' the bad luck yore comp'ny's been havin'. We all have them hard times occasional. Myself, I've had right good luck recent. An' I noticed a coupla young ladies in that show o' yours that I kinda admire. They got good faces—like yore own, ma'am," he added as an afterthought, and even the hard-boiled Lily Burke brightened perceptibly.

"I think I know which ones you mean," she said. "We haven't got so many beauties in this show. You mean the soubrette and the ingénue."

"Thar names was Betty Somethin' an' Cherry Somethin' on the programs, ma'am. Now, I ain't no masher, an' I ain't aimin' to meet these here gals, but I'd like to know that these here ladies gits thar way paid back to Noo York. I'd like you to give 'em this—after I'm gone. An' it ain't at all necessary to say whar it come from."

Blue Steel handed the astounded Lily a quartet of yellowbacked bills. "Yo're an honest woman, with yore face," he said. "Jest see that them little ladies is taken care of. An' I reckon thar's enough to pay yore own way, too."

The hard lines in Lily Burke's face faded away, and the hard eyes were moist. "Thanks. Oh, thank you, sir," she said huskily. "I—I didn't think I'd be acceptin' charity when I went on the stage, but—oh, thank you so much."

She fled from the lobby, to hide the embarrassment of tears.

"That ain't no charity, ma'am," Blue Steel quickly flung after her. "That's jest a little gift from the men o' Lariat to artists that knows thar business."

"I think I'm going to remember you a long time, sir," said Burke, gratefully, after Lily had gone backstage to find Cherry Slosson and Betty Brent. "Say, if the men get back that dough, I assure you that what you did will be only a loan."

"If they recover the money this troupe of mine starts back to New York to-morrow. If they don't—say, you're from Poco. What sort of a town is it? We're billed to play there next week."

"Poco?" replied Blue. "It's a mighty fine little cow town, an' if you reach thar, stranger, I'll guarantee that you'll have a houseful that night if I have to herd in all the waddies down thataway into the the-ayter with a six-gun. But I reckon I'll be gittin' on toward the station. I wanta feed an' water my hoss 'fore we start."

CHAPTER X.

A MAN RIDES HARD.

AT ten forty-two, such residents as still remained in the town of Lariat were treated to the unusual sight of a horse being helped up a ramp into an express car, while an indignant express-messenger argued with Sims Halliday, the station-master.

But Sims was eloquent, and obdurate, and, in addition, the conductor of the Big Horn Express had not forgotten Blue Steel's work in saving the train crew from possible murder in the holdup months before, and when the ten forty-two chugged out of Lariat, Blue Steel and Pancho his stallion were speeding on the first leg of their journey toward Poco.

As the train roared on toward the Powder River, the engineer trying to make up the time unexpectedly lost at Lariat, Blue Steel kept wondering what could have happened back in Poco to demand his presence.

His father had never telegraphed him before. He had picked up a number of letters from the Wagon Wheel in his roving about the West, but not once had there been a telegram. Somehow, he just couldn't say why, he associated a telegram with death. And yet, who could be dead at the Wagon Wheel Ranch?

Just a few days previously, before starting from the Black Hills country, he had met a wandering waddie from the Powder River section who had told him that all the boys were well at the Wagon Wheel. His father had been apparently in the best of health.

Of course, men could be in the best of health, and then have their lives snuffed out in a gun-fight, but it wouldn't be likely with old J. S. No, sir! Blue knew that his father could handle a six-gun with any man, young or old, in the Powder River country. It was he who had taught Blue Steel to ride and shoot.

And, furthermore, the fire was going out of his father's system these days. He knew that his father had become more peaceable than formerly.

Could it be that something was wrong with his uncle, John Ballou? Uncle John had not been in the best of health for years. It might be Uncle John. He rather leaned to this opinion.

And yet, as the train tore through the night, Blue Steel tried to laugh away his fears and worries. Maybe the Old Man was taking to sending telegrams these days since his son was seldom in a community long enough to receive mail.

Oh, well, he'd make Poco well before noon the next morning, with this lift that Sims Halliday had arranged for him. At the end of his train journey he would ride hard, maybe make the Wagon Wheel by nine or ten o'clock. And then, perhaps, and the wish was father to the thought, he would probably find that there was nothing to worry about after all.

The express messenger, at first sullen at the irregularity of carrying such an unusual shipment as a man and his horse, found himself strangely liking this lithe young buckaroo as the train speeded on. He was almost sorry to lose him as a companion when the train made its stop at Pampas at three in the morning, and this likable young puncher left the train to make the rest of the journey by horseback.

From Pampas, down along the winding trail beside the Powder River, rode Blue Steel under a sky powdered with stars. He gave Pancho his head and the miles seemed

fairly to skim beneath the hoofs of the blue-black stallion, a beautiful animal of over twelve hundred pounds weight, with sloping withers and long pasterns, high-held head, and arched neck, his tail a plume of black silk.

Pancho, the blue-black stallion of Blue Steel, had come in for much comment at cowboy gatherings, where he always dominated the hitch-rail with their usual cluster of short-necked, close-coupled cowponies.

This young buckaroo had been riding him for the past two years now, after having started to conquer him as an outlaw on the plains of Montana.

Blue Steel smiled as he recalled the day that Pancho had first been singled out of the remuda to feel the initial tug of the hackamore rope. What a spirited rebel Pancho had been then! It had seemed that the heart of the midnight thoroughbred with the four white stockings never could be tamed, or that he might have to break his heart and take the spirit out of him in the process.

He recalled scenes among the Indians when they were taming an outlaw in this way by hobbling him and abusing him until the horse was ready to quit and acknowledge servility.

Kind treatment, however, had eventually made a tractable equine citizen of the fiery-eyed Pancho without breaking his spirit, and as soon as he had learned to behave under the saddle, tidbits commenced to come forth from the pockets of the young broncho-twister who was his master. Now, after nearly two years, there was a positively human understanding between horse and rider.

They were an unusual pair, with a strange affinity for each other. Almost were they the body and head of a Centaur. Pancho could gallop great distances at breakneck speed and, except for a coating of lather, still look the same tireless, satiny-coated king of horses, just as Blue Steel, despite gun-fights, hard riding, and divers adversities, was never discovered unshaven or dusty.

Horse and rider were always as neat as a pair of well-fed cats, whether at rodeo

or round-up. Blue Steel, not given to boasting about himself, frequently boasted of his horse—the horse that could beat anything that ever wore hair, in the owner's opinion, and more than once the owner had proved it.

On through the night galloped Pancho, with long, powerful strides. Never the stroke of a quirt ridged his satiny hide.

"Come on, Pancho! Come on, boy!" was the quirt that never failed to quicken the pace of the blue-black stallion. As fleet as a race horse, he ate up the miles, now pointing straight as an arrow along the prairie road, now curving about the trail as it wound to follow the course of the river; as sure-footed as a mule, he threaded his way down the perilous highway carved along the steep slope that overlooked Poco Valley.

As the sun peeped over a butte to the eastward, man and rider topped the final rise of Wild Horse Ridge, and below, smiling in the sunlight, swept the green-carpeted reaches of Little Poco Valley, long a stockman's Paradise.

At the southeastern tip of that Valley was the Wagon Wheel Ranch.

"Good ol' Pancho!" murmured Blue Steel in his horse's ear. "We're comin' near home now, ol' boy, an' I reckon y'ain't like one that don't know it. We could fair coast in from here, Pancho, ol' boy!"

The big blue-black stallion nickered understandingly, and his white-stockinged legs continued to weave tirelessly on.

Blue Steel's memories of the past few years possessed him as he rode along. Here was a water-hole where he had watered his horse when he first left home to ride up to take part in the wars between cowmen and rustlers in Sheridan and Johnson Counties; there was the grazing-ground of the sheep that had all but caused a bloody war with the cattlemen when the woolly creatures were first brought down there to level to the ground the bunch-grass that once grew here almost knee-high; here was some earlier memory, there another.

Over this country, as a boy, years before, he had gone riding with Sally Tolliver,

until the news reached the rival ranches and it was made plain to him that Steeles and Tollivers did not mix. Pretty girl that Sally Tolliver must be now, with her gray eyes and her tawny hair; possibly married by this time.

The pleasant country unfolded before him, checkerboards of fences confining the cattle of various ranches. He had often listened to his father's stories of life on the open range, before there were any fences and before Wyoming was a State. He yearned for the freer life and adventure of those days.

Pancho's swift hoofs echoed through the cliff-bordered road which would lead through a lightly-timbered country and then, after a sharp turn, straight into the town of Poco.

Far ahead of him Blue Steel made out a cloud of dust, the dust likely kicked up by some horseman riding out from Poco. It would probably be some one that he knew, or at least some one who knew the Wagon Wheel gang and could give him news of the ranch.

Blue Steel made the sharp turn that put him on the road leading straight into Poco, but the rider was not now visible. He made out another lone rider dotting the prairie just outside of Poco, but the first rider had disappeared somewhere.

It was just possible, thought Blue, that the first rider had turned into the roadway of one of the small ranches whose snug little outbuildings could be seen perhaps a mile ahead of him.

He guided Pancho along swiftly, and was passing through a part of the roadway bordered by short new timber. It wouldn't be long before he was home now.

And then from the clump of trees to his left came a sharp report, and a bullet hummed by the ear of Blue Steel. There was another report, and Blue Steel tumbled from his saddle and fell into the roadway, while Pancho continued on a few paces, and then circled and began nickering nervously.

Blue Steel lay prone for an instant, then turned over slowly. His arm flopped limply over his face, and he lay absolutely still.



The Perfect Scheme

By GORDON STILES

Author of "The Call to Arms," "A Sweet Voyage," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

MERLE WENTWORTH rose from his chair in the "side-arm" lunch room where he usually took his breakfast and, with his throat still warm from the final draft of coffee, made his way into the biting cold of the street and turned his footsteps in the direction of the subway station at Broadway and One Hundred and Thirty-Seventh Street. With the patience which New York's great tunnels have bred in millions of free-born citizens, he allowed himself to be herded into an already over-jammed express where he stood, wedged in too tightly to read the newspaper, scanning the array of old familiar advertising cards that extended the length of the car on either side.

Tampers Pills—Hold-Fast Shoe Laces—Armor Brand Underwear—Dotty Dimple Soap—all there. No new ones this morning. Merle knew the list by heart.

He knew every curl and quirk in the decorative borders, every comma in the text matter. So, by the time the train had reached Seventy-Second Street, he had withdrawn his attention from the signs and had given himself over to thought.

That was what happened most mornings and his cogitations almost invariably ran along the same line.

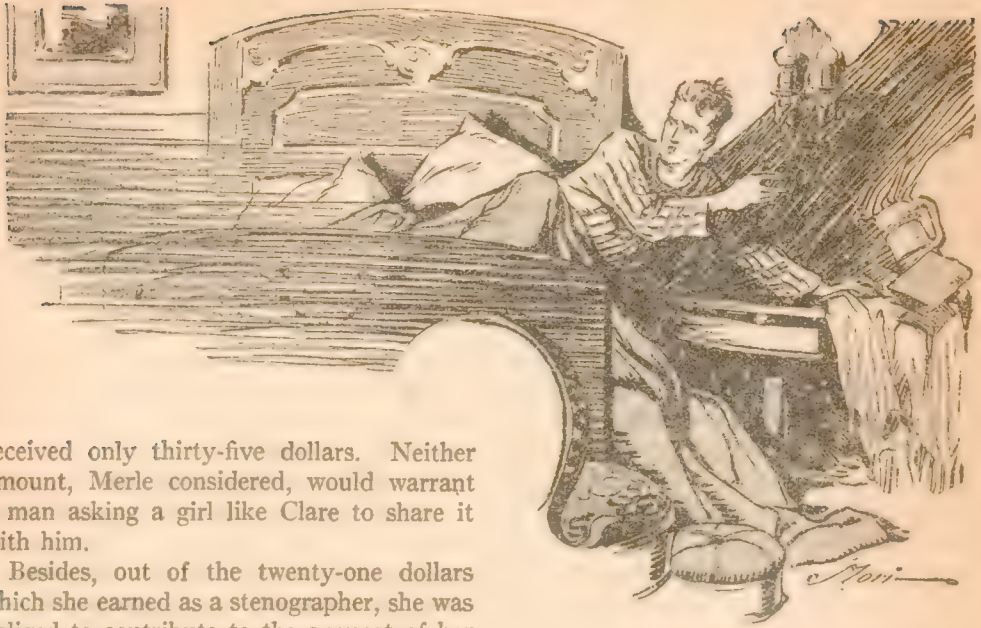
The mental process naturally began with Clare Hollis and, in his mind, Merle checked off her outstanding qualities, to wit: Beautiful, graceful, sweet, charming, bright, poised—well, that was a beginning. She had a lot of others which were simply indefinable!

You had to see her eager, lovely face, her soft, brown hair and her adorable lips, to understand. And hear her marvelous, liquid voice!

She liked him. Merle felt sure of that. Still "liking" was not "loving." She probably liked a number of fellows—among them, Harvey Sykes, blast him!

Merle thought that, if he had a decent income, he might perhaps pull away from the field. But what could a chap do on thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents a week, the sum which Merle drew every Saturday from the thin-lipped cashier of the Wilmot Office Supply Company, Fulton Street?

In that connection, there was a bit of consolation in the fact that Harvey Sykes



received only thirty-five dollars. Neither amount, Merle considered, would warrant a man asking a girl like Clare to share it with him.

Besides, out of the twenty-one dollars which she earned as a stenographer, she was obliged to contribute to the support of her mother whose other resources consisted of thirty dollars a month, allowed by a grateful government for the loss of a husband, rendered half an invalid by the Spanish-American War. He had died when Clare was three and the widow struggled pitifully until the girl, at seventeen, had been able to help.

Now, when Clare had passed her twenty-first birthday, they had at last attained a moderate degree of comfort.

Whatever various suitors may have meant to Clare herself, it was unlikely that she would rush into marriage. Her mother, she felt, set much store by the independence of their home. And she more or less lived for her mother.

Merle knew this; so did Harvey Sykes. So did any other young men who came into more than passing contact with the Hollis household. Thus, it was apparent that whoever won Clare would have to be bolstered by as many arguments as he could muster.

And financial stability loomed large in the minds of two aspirants, at least. If a man could offer a home that would insure entire comfort, coupled with an arrangement that would make Mrs. Hollis feel that she was no burden, it seemed reasonable that he would stand a better show than

one who could not do so. The usual masculine idea.

And this morning, as the subway train jerked spasmodically toward lower Manhattan, Merle went again over the same old ground and arrived at the same old conclusion—unless a miracle happened, he would not be able to ask Clare Hollis to marry him for a good ten years. And by that time—

He glanced again at the advertising signs. Every one of them meant that somebody was making money, a lot of it. Why didn't he, Merle Wentworth, have the brains to invent a colic cure or a new type of garter or something?

If he did, he thought, ruefully, somebody would be certain to pinch his idea. Still, he ought to rate something better than assistant cost clerk of the Wilmot Office Supply Company!

The train rolled into Fulton Street station; Merle scrambled out on to the platform and inched along with the mob oozing through the bottle neck of the turnstiles. Five minutes later, he nodded good morning to Harvey Sykes, already at his post in the sales department.

He did not like Sykes, but was fair enough to admit to himself that it prob-

ably was because of the latter's interest in Clare who once had worked for the Wilmot company but had left to better herself. At the same time, it was Sykes with whom he most often went to lunch, at the cafeteria around the corner on William Street.

They had not much in common, knew little of one another. Merle was a country lad from Ohio, an orphan. Sykes, he understood, was a city product. But neither had inquired extensively into the other's antecedents.

They frequently lunch together, now and then played a game of pool, simply because they worked in the same office and were about of an age. Not an uncommon situation.

And, exchanging casual greetings that December morning, neither of them could have any reason for knowing that within forty-eight hours something would happen that would vitally affect both of their lives!

II.

At the offices of the Wilmot company, it was the custom to place all mail addressed to individuals in a basket provided for the purpose, which stood on a corner of the reception clerk's desk. As the various employees arrived, they were wont to examine the contents of this basket and abstract such letters as belonged to them.

On the morning with which we are concerned, Harvey Sykes appeared earlier than usual. For no particular reason; he had simply accomplished the journey from his boarding place in Bay Ridge more swiftly than ordinarily. The reception girl was not at her desk when he walked in, but the mail basket contained a bunch of letters.

Harvey ran through these, made a slight grimace as he recognized an envelope from the gents' furnishing shop which he patronized. Then he paused and inspected curiously a communication addressed to Merle Wentworth, and forwarded from Templeton, Ohio.

Its foreign stamp caught his eye; the head of King George. The post mark was Edinburgh. Now what, Harvey wondered, could anybody in Scotland be writing to Wentworth for?

Always curious, Harvey examined the card on the flap of the envelope:

CRAIG, CRAIG & CRAIG

Solicitors

Prince's Street, Edinburgh.

Funny. Merle never had mentioned having friends or relatives in that part of the world. Harvey burned to know what the mysterious envelope contained.

He glanced about. Nobody was in sight and, acting on a sudden impulse, the young man slipped Merle's letter into his pocket along with the unopened epistle belonging to himself.

He was not quite sure what he meant to do. He had a vague idea of somehow opening the missive, if it could be done without fear of detection, acquainting himself with the contents and slipping the letter back into the basket next morning. Merle never would know the difference. Anyhow, he'd chance it.

Accordingly, he bided his time; waited for an opportunity to carry out his design. He had no scruples about the matter, determined that if he damaged the envelope in the course of his operations, he would destroy the whole thing.

If it turned out to be something important, the parties would write again. The letter would be looked upon as lost, that was all.

Twice that morning he spoke to Merle but when the latter approached him at noon, ready to go out for lunch, Harvey said: "Can't go this noon. Got an appointment with the dentist." Whereupon Merle departed alone.

Harvey was taking no chances of interruption; he had worked out a plan in advance. Thus, when his colleague had disappeared, he made his way to the subway and boarded a northbound train. At Twenty-Eighth Street, he alighted and betook himself to a small hotel. There, in the seclusion of the writing room, he drew forth Merle's letter.

As it turned out, opening it proved an extremely simple matter. The tapering stock of a pen, inserted beneath the flap and worked gently forward, did the trick.

And presently the last bit of dry gum yielded.

Harvey sighed with satisfaction. With a furtive glance about him, he pulled the letter from its container. A single sheet of paper it was, and as he unfolded it, Harvey thought that probably it would not be of the slightest interest to him.

Then came the shock of his life!

He scanned the contents once, stared, went through it a second time!

"Holy Moses!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "Lord Almighty!"

Again he picked up the paper and scowled as he perused what was written thereon:

MERLE WENTWORTH, ESQ.,
Templeton, Ohio,
United States of America.

Dear Sir—It is with regret that we inform you—assuming that you have not been already appraised of the fact—of the death of your great uncle, Donald Wentworth, late of Dundee, who passed away on the seventeenth ultimo. We should have notified you earlier, but for the fact that it required a considerable search of Mr. Wentworth's effects to discover that you appear to be his sole surviving blood relative.

In the circumstances, inasmuch as our former client died intestate, the entire estate will be inherited by you. Therefore we urge that you reply promptly on receipt of this in order that we—or such representatives as you may see fit to designate—may apply for letters of administration. Otherwise, after a stated time has elapsed, the property and personal possessions will be taken over by the Public Administrator.

The amount of the estate is quite considerable, even in these days, comprising, as it does something in excess of one hundred thousand pounds sterling, and a number of matters entailed require immediate attention.

May we not have your acknowledgment at once and, considering that Mr. Wentworth was for years one of our valued clients, may we venture to hope that you will permit us to act for you in any needful capacity?

Details regarding this inheritance, together with suggestions as to procedure, will be supplied directly we hear from you. In the meantime, sir, we have the honor to remain,

Your obedient servants,

Per pro
CRAIG, CRAIG & CRAIG.
DOUGLAS CRAIG.

"One hundred thousand pounds!" exclaimed Harvey. "More than half a million dollars! Christmas!"

Oblivious to the passing of time, he sat there, staring at the astounding letter and muttering: "The lucky stiff! I'll be damned!"

Finally he glanced at the clock and saw that he had overstayed his time by thirty minutes. He rose, hurriedly returned the letter to its envelope which he replaced in his pocket without sealing.

Twenty minutes later, he was trying to appear casual when Merle inquired: "Have a good time with the dentist?"

"Uh—yeah! Swell time!" He essayed a grin but the effort was weak. And for the balance of the day his services were worth to the Wilmot Office Supply Company, exactly nothing.

III.

HARVEY SYKES could not have pointed to his record of antecedents exactly with pride. His father had been a stone mason, given to frequent alcoholic debauches; his mother had run away with another man when he, Harvey, was six.

Somehow he had scrambled up to the age when he could help himself, and it must be admitted that he deserved a certain amount of credit for working himself into a clerical position with the Wilmot company.

At sixteen he had secured a job as office boy in a brokerage house and there, by virtue of association with a decent class of employees, he had acquired a veneer of polish. But he was discharged for certain manipulation of postage funds and that, too, taught him something.

He watched his step more carefully in his next position—that of assistant to the freight clerk in a furniture establishment. He was quick to grasp details and naturally clever so that he had no trouble in holding down his job and eventually he obtained a place on the sales force of Wilmot's.

What his employers did not know was that once, during the period he had been with them, Harvey had found himself skating on very thin ice. His worst vice was gambling and, having got over his head in a poker game, he had used certain moneys which he had collected on behalf of the company.

For a day or two it had looked to him like inevitable exposure and prompt dismissal, if not arrest. But through one Emil Dost, a crooked lawyer whom Harvey had met in a card game, he managed to obtain the funds to turn in before inquiries should be made.

It was a narrow squeak and, naturally, Harvey was grateful to Dost although he never had known just why he confided in the attorney or why the latter saw fit to help him out.

Dost, however, had his own reasons. His judgment as to who might or might not become useful to him in the future had always proved sound. He had a hunch, that was all. How good that hunch was in Harvey's case will be seen presently.

Had Merle Wentworth himself received the letter which Harvey had intercepted he could scarcely have been more agitated than was Sykes. After business that day, the latter went about with a spinning brain.

His mind was a mixture of amazement, resentment that such good fortune should befall his rival, and a vague wonder if he could not, somehow, turn the thing to his own advantage. He was unable to see how this was to be accomplished but he toyed with the idea.

He gritted his teeth at the picture of Merle Wentworth, independently rich, married to Clare Hollis! Damn it! He would tear the blasted letter in pieces; that would delay Merle's good luck, at least. He would not be in a position to crow over his associates yet awhile.

Then, upon the scene stalked the one person to whom Harvey could talk about the matter—the one man who knew that he was out of jail and holding his job by a fluke, as it were. Emil Dost!

As luck would have it, the lawyer strolled into the speak-easy restaurant where Harvey was eating and, seeing the latter, came over to his table.

The two exchanged greetings and Sykes said quickly: "This is damned queer."

"What is damned queer?" Dost replied.

"You coming in this way when you're the very person I want to see. I guess I would have looked you up if you hadn't come along."

Dost smiled faintly. "Not in a jam again, are you?" he inquired softly.

"No jam. But something has happened that has me all excited. It's got my goat and it's all wrong."

"Well, spill it," Dost told him, noting as he did so, the high color in Harvey's cheeks, the glitter in his eyes. Already, Dost was taking an interest.

In a few words, the other sketched the situation, then looked carefully about and reached into his pocket for the missive. Dost took it eagerly.

His small, black eyes skimmed rapidly through its contents. When he had finished he folded the sheet, restored it to the envelope and handed it back to Harvey without a word.

But he drew a little harder on his cigar and was troubled to conceal his impatience to hear what Harvey was going to say.

From the latter, after an awkward pause: "Well?"

"Well yourself," Dost retorted. "Seems to me you have got all worked up over nothing. You don't fit in the picture as far as I can see."

This was only a feeler, however. Mr. Dost's nimble brain already was at "full speed ahead." But he wanted to learn what was in Harvey's mind before offering further comment.

"I suppose not. But, damn it, I *ought* to fit in the picture, as you put it. That's a lot of jack, five hundred thousand dollars! I was just wondering if there wasn't some way of getting in on it. Maybe if I could steer him your way—you look after his interests—something like that. Would there be a cut in it for me? See what I mean? Something like that."

Dost glanced shrewdly at his companion.

"Bright boy," he said. "You bet your life there would be a cut in it for you. But, if Wentworth doesn't mention the thing to you right away, how could you expect to steer him to me?"

"In that case, I couldn't, of course," Harvey said ruefully. "But I—oh, hell! Giving this letter to Merle, that is, putting it back where he'll get it, is just like passing over that much money to him. Gawd, I wish it was mine!"

Dost pondered a moment, staring at the ash on the end of his cigar then said: "That was all you had in mind, hey?"

"All!" Harvey exclaimed. "I've had a hell of a lot of things in mind. That son of a gun will get this jack and go right off and marry the jane who's got me running in circles and talking to myself! And that's only a part of it. He won't have any fun with the money. He—"

"I begin to see why you hate to pass on the joyful tidings. Why don't you wait until he collects, then sandbag him gently?"

"Yeah!" Harvey snorted, contemptuously. "Sandbag my eye! That Merle will have everything he collects all sewed up in four-per-cent bonds—registered and all that. He'll take 'em to bed with him nights!"

Dost drummed on the table with his finger tips; his eyes narrowed for a moment. Then he said: "I'll dope out a scheme to get that business, Harvey. You let it lay over another day. It won't make any difference. Then you come around to my place when you get through to-morrow night. I want to think about this a little."

He bestowed what he meant to be a pleasant smile on Sykes, and rose from the table.

"So long," he said, offering his hand.

"What's on your mind, anyhow?" Harvey asked, a little excitedly.

"Same as what's on yours. You come around to-morrow," Dost rejoined and walked briskly away.

IV.

AT about the same moment when Dost and Harvey Sykes parted in the restaurant, Merle Wentworth, having finished a leisurely dinner at his favorite eating place, boarded a One Hundred and Eighty-First Street crosstown surface car which presently deposited him near the corner of Tremont Avenue and Welling Place, Bronx. At a drug store, he purchased a pound box of chocolates and a few minutes later, presented himself at a modest apartment in Welling Place.

Clare herself, opened the door and her eyes lighted with pleasure when she saw her visitor.

"I'm so glad you came, Merle," she told

him. "I felt sort of pokey this evening. Oh, thank you so much."

She took the proffered box of sweets and ushered Merle into the living room where Mrs. Hollis sat reading the paper. The elder woman greeted the caller pleasantly, but tarried only a few minutes, leaving the young people together.

To Merle, Clare seemed more charming, more desirable than ever to-night. But, he remembered, that was the way he always felt whenever he saw her.

It was hard, very hard to restrain himself from taking her in his arms and pouring forth all the things he had wanted to say for months. But that damned thirty-seven fifty a week intruded, as ever. Fancy asking this marvelous creature to take a chance on that!

Merle said: "How about going to the movies? Looks like a good bill at the Braymore."

"I'd love to go, Merle," she said. "I'll be ready in a jiffy."

"Perhaps your mother would like to come along," he suggested.

"That's sweet of you, Merle. I'll ask her." She slipped into Mrs. Hollis's room and returned in a moment to say that her mother would join them.

The three were in great spirits. The evening was brisk but clear; the program excellent. As they set their faces homeward, Clare proposed: "Let's stop in the delicatessen and get a piece of cheese. I'll make a rabbit."

"Fine!" agreed Merle. "There's a good place across the street."

They started to cross Tremont Avenue. They had almost gained the far side, with Mrs. Hollis a little in advance, when a big motor car, traveling at a speed far in excess of the legal limit, swung in from a cross street, skidded, and, before either Clare or Merle could reach Mrs. Hollis to drag her to safety, the old lady was caught, swept against the curb, and hurled violently to the sidewalk.

Clare screamed and rushed to her parent's side, while Merle fought valiantly to fend off the crowd that instantly pressed in from all directions. A policeman dashed to his aid, and in a moment a space was

cleared about where Clare knelt, white-faced and half hysterical, her mother's head resting against her knee.

The victim was chalk white and motionless—to all appearances dead. As Merle reached Clare's side an elderly gentleman forced his way through the crowd. To the officers he said, "I'm a doctor," and they made way for him.

A very brief examination, then the physician said to the trembling Clare: "She's alive but badly hurt. Compound fracture of the thigh, I'm afraid, and possibly there are serious internal injuries. The police will have an ambulance here in a minute."

The expected vehicle appeared shortly, and after a hideous three-quarters of an hour, during which those concerned were subjected to a hail of questions from police and hospital authorities, Merle found himself half supporting Clare on a settee in the hospital anteroom, while they awaited the verdict of the physicians who were caring for Mrs. Hollis.

Dr. Mapes, who had come forward at the time of the accident, had taken his departure after leaving his card with the assurance that he would be glad to aid in any possible manner. He had caused Merle to blush furiously in spite of the situation by remarking:

"You'd better look after your wife; she will probably have a nasty reaction to all this."

Merle was thankful that Clare did not hear the words.

But the girl carried herself admirably, and when, at almost three o'clock in the morning, Merle brought her to her own door again, she seemed as calm as himself—more so, in fact. Mrs. Hollis would live, but the broken thigh would require months to right itself, the doctors had declared.

At her age it was serious. But, since the patient was in good hands, there was nothing Clare could do, and her mother, regaining consciousness, had insisted that the girl return home.

The police were searching for the driver of the car which had caused the damage, but nobody had secured the number, and the machine had sped swiftly away from the scene. Merle's fingers itched when he

thought of it, but he was helpless, of course.

He had patted Clare's shoulder tenderly at leaving her, and his whole being ached to comfort her as he would have liked to do. But she was overwrought and tired, and he felt that it would have been taking an unfair advantage.

So he let her go, and spent a most miserable night, entirely unstrung by the calamity and what it would mean to Clare. He shuddered at the struggle which the girl must face—doctors' and hospital bills, agony of mind—it was terrible! If only he could—if he had the right to—bah, he was a pauper himself, a helpless, penniless failure!

V.

WHEN Harvey Sikes learned next day of the accident to Clare's mother, he said to Merle: "Pretty tough on Clare. I wonder if there isn't some way we could help her."

"Gosh, I'd like to!" Merle replied. "But I just about know what Clare would say if anybody offered to help her out with cash."

"So do I," Harvey agreed. "She'd turn you down cold, probably be sore. Guess you're right; it would be a miscue."

Harvey, however, at once telephoned to the girl, extending his sympathy and saying that if he could be of any service he hoped she would call on him. To which Clare replied that she appreciated the kindness of his offer, but there really was no way in which he could help her. She was quite all right. Yes, she would be delighted to see him if he called.

Hanging up the receiver, Harvey indulged in an orgy of riotous thought. In his pocket was the letter from Craig, Craig & Craig. Now, less than ever, did he feel inclined to allow it to fall into Merle's hands.

He conjured up a mental picture of the scene of the evening before—the accident, Merle on the spot with aid and comfort for Clare. Such things as that brought people closer together.

And with all the trouble which the girl would be called upon to face, Merle, fortified by a snug fortune, would romp home

with the prize if he, Harvey, knew anything about human nature. No! His rival would not get that plum yet awhile, if it could be prevented by hook or crook.

He wondered what Dost would have to say about the matter. If there seemed no chance to turn their knowledge to advantage, he would rather tear up the letter, watch for subsequent communications and serve them the same way, than let Merle find out at this stage of the game!

After awhile the estate would pass into the hands of the public administrator, in which case it was doubtful if Wentworth ever would hear any more about it.

Somehow, Harvey stumbled through his day's work, too excited to know where he was at most of the time. Come five thirty, he presented himself at the small, gloomy office of Emil Dost in William Street.

Dost, he found, was tremendously excited about something, and Harvey almost winced under the searching look which the other cast upon him as they exchanged greetings. Instead of sitting down, as he usually did, Dost paced the room as he talked, and the lawyer's first sledge hammer statement sent prickles up and down his visitor's spine.

"I've done a lot of figuring since last night," Dost opened. "And I may as well tell you that I see a chance for a killing—a real honest-to-God killing! Why be a piker? I knew what was in your mind last night. You were thinking you'd give your ears if you could lift the whole bunch!"

Harvey started, and Dost went on: "That was it. You know you were! Well, let's do it! I've got it all doped out!"

"Wha-wha-a-at?" exclaimed Harvey.

"That's what! It can be done! With a little nerve—if you've got it—the trick can be turned. Without any danger, to speak of!"

Harvey sank into a chair. Dost had hit the nail on the head. But with his limited knowledge of legal affairs, Harvey could not quite see how the thing was to be accomplished.

He stared at Dost. "Go on," he said. "Tell me how it can be done. Then I'll see if I have the nerve."

"That's the spirit," Dost assured him.

"And you'll be surprised how easy it is. I've been over all the ground and I can't see any loophole. It's hardly a gamble!"

"All right. Go on. Let's hear it."

"I gathered from what you said that you and young Wentworth are about the same age. Is that right?"

"There can't be more than a couple of years' difference," Harvey said.

"Then it's simple as mud. You will collect the money in the name of Merle Wentworth!"

Harvey snorted in disgust. "You're crazy!" he said. "Fat chance of pulling anything so raw as that! We'd both land in the coop in about twenty minutes, and stay there for about twenty years. Do you mean to say that's your bright idea?"

"Listen, you fool!" Dost snarled. "You heard me say that the thing could be pulled off without practically any danger, didn't you? Well, then, here you go bellyaching about twenty years in prison before I have given you one single detail of the scheme. What's eating you?"

"Well, I don't see letting myself in for a stretch up the Hudson. I'd rather be poor but honest, and outside, than rich and crooked, and inside!"

"Hell, don't talk to me about being crooked! You're crooked already. And you got nothing out of it. Piking stuff! So I don't mind being crooked if nobody gets wise to it. That being as it is, my combination is rich and crooked—and outside, to borrow your way of sizing it up. Now you pay attention to me, Sykes, and I'll slip you an earful worth picking up. Give me that letter."

Harvey passed the document over. Dost unfolded it and spread it out on the desk at which he finally had seated himself.

"Here," he continued, "is a letter advising one Merle Wentworth—whom the writer never has seen and but recently heard of—that a half million dollars is waiting for him.

"Good! This Craig party has assumed that his letter will reach the person to whom it is addressed. And when he receives a prompt answer from the said person, he will have no doubt that all is well. So you will answer the letter. Do you see?"

"Damned if I see."

"Well, then, I'll make you see. I have already prepared an affidavit appointing me, Emil Dost, the attorney in fact as well as attorney at law for Merle Wentworth. You will sign that with the name of Merle Wentworth!"

The fundamentals of the plan by now had percolated into Harvey's bewildered brain.

He interposed: "That would have to be witnessed before a notary—and acknowledged."

"That's easy. I know dozens of notaries, good ones—and others not so good. If I take you to any of them with this paper and say you are Merle Wentworth, that you want to sign a paper, there will be no question about it. But, so that there may be even less to worry about later, I will take the paper along without you and get the acknowledgment just the same. Also, I can get a couple of perfectly good witnesses—quite respectable, so far as anybody knows—who will sign anything I ask them to.

"There'll be no come-back on that part of it. It's only a formality. But the first move is up to you. You take a room in some part of the city where you are not known. Say you are a traveling salesman, so it will not be thought strange if you are not there much. Using that address, write to Craig, Craig & Craig, saying that you have received their letter forwarded from Templeton, Ohio. Mention that you have left Templeton, and that they are right in assuming you to be the last of your family. That will wash out any chance of this Craig monkeying with the Templeton end of the string. Templeton will be eliminated quite naturally.

"Then you go on to say that you have turned the letter, together with a power of attorney, over to your lawyer, Emil Dost, 987 William Street, New York, and that said Dost will communicate with them on the subject. They may look me up in the bar directory, see my name there, but that will probably be about all.

"Once they have accepted the situation, which they will do when a duly executed and properly witnessed power of attorney

follows your letter, the only further investigating they are at all likely to do is to communicate with my witnesses and possibly the notary. In which event, they will receive replies assuring them that all is correct. I will look out for that.

"Now, these matters being accomplished as I have set forth, what, may I ask, is to prevent you and me plucking off that nice little wad of jack in short order?"

He paused, hands on hips, and looked fixedly, triumphantly at Harvey.

"Holy cats!" he said. "You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Can you think of anything else?" Dost challenged.

"Suppose—suppose," Harvey began, then halted before the scornful eyes of his companion. Getting a fresh start, he said: "Suppose Merle gets on to it."

"How in hell is he going to get onto it, as you say? If by any chance—which is out of the question—the Craig boys should write to him, the letter will be addressed to the new location which you are to dig up, and you will get it. The only gap that has to be covered is the time between the sending of our letter and their reply to it. That is up to you.

"All you have to do is keep your eye on the office mail for a couple of weeks at the outside. That will be superfluous because they will allow time for a reply to their first communication before writing again. But you can do it just to cover yourself."

Harvey had been thinking, and now he nodded his head understandingly.

"It looks airtight," he admitted. "But it gives me a queer feeling to think where we'd be if anything slipped up."

"Don't be an ass. Nothing will slip up. Here's the sweetest layout anybody ever had to clean up with. Made to order! You want the money, don't you?"

"Sa-aa-y!"

"Well, then, come here and stick 'Merle Wentworth' on the dotted line and let's go."

Harvey extended his hand, took the offered pen. Once more he hesitated. "By the way, how much do you get out of the pot?"

Dost laughed. "I had been waiting for that," he said. "I'll be generous with you. Only fifty per cent."

Harvey laid the pen down. "Fifty per cent!" he cried. "Why, that's highway robbery!"

"Easy there! What in hell did you think? That I was going to put this thing across for twenty-five dollars or so? Get your wits unscrambled, kid. I mentioned that I was being generous. Fifty per cent is generous, damned generous! Just sign that paper and quit making funny jokes. There are some other things to talk about, and I want to get this witnessed to-night."

Harvey reached for the paper, affixed the words "Merle Wentworth," in a bold hand, gulped, and sank back, shivering with excitement.

VI.

AFTER leaving the lawyer's office Harvey went through the motions of eating dinner, but his appetite had fled before the rush of emotions that beset him. The whole business seemed so unreal!

Here he was definitely committed to a conspiracy to steal more than five hundred thousand dollars! The prize was great, enough to tempt anybody inclined to live by his wits. But the penalty, if he were detected— Well, he shuddered to think of it!

Nevertheless, he was getting a terrific kick out of it already. Playing for high stakes he was. Visions of newspaper headlines came to him, such as:

CHARGES THEFT OF \$500,000 ESTATE

Half Million Stolen by Clever Ruse—Plotters in Toils

That part of it gave Harvey the shivers. But the terror thus inspired vanished before other imaginary press items:

YOUNG MILLIONAIRE

WEDS STENOGRAPHER

Romance Which Began in Office
Reaches Happy Climax

After an extended honeymoon in Europe, Mr. and Mrs. Sykes will make their home in Great Neck, Long Island, where the bride-

groom has purchased an extensive estate. Mrs. Margaret Hollis, mother of the bride, will reside with the young couple.

Stuff like that. Harvey let his thoughts run along these pleasant channels. Already he had decided to explain the affluence which was to be his by the story of a legacy.

That would be the only safe bet. To attribute his new wealth to sudden business prosperity might lead to embarrassing questions.

After awhile the young plotter snapped out of his dream. He was getting away ahead of the game. He wondered how Dost was coming on with the forged papers. The latter had promised to telephone him around ten o'clock that night, which left some hours to kill.

What better, then, than going to see Clare? The sooner he started events moving toward the end he had in mind, the easier it would be to clinch matters when the proper time should arrive. Thus, armed with a box of roses, Harvey presently pressed the bell of Clare's flat in Welling Place.

She seemed a little surprised at seeing him, but exclaimed with pleasure over the flowers.

"I thought you might take them to your mother," Harvey told her.

"She'll love them, poor dear," Clare assured him. "I was just about to go to the hospital. Perhaps you'd like to come along."

"Nothing I'd like better," he said. "What do you hear from there?"

"She is not in pain any longer. They do not think she has been hurt internally. But it will be a long siege for her, at her age. I am told that she can't possibly leave the place for at least two months."

"Oh, that is too bad!" Harvey's voice was filled with sympathy. "It will be pretty tough on you, Clare."

"Nothing will be too tough on me if she only comes out all right."

"Of course." He nodded understandingly. "I wish I could do something to make it easier for both of you. If I ever can—"

"I know," she interrupted. "It's mighty

fine of you. If there's any way you can help, I'll let you know."

"Do let me know," he urged, as they set out.

When he left the girl, soon after nine, on the plea that he must meet a friend arriving at Grand Central, Harvey felt that he had done well by himself. He must not be impatient; he must proceed with the utmost caution—make no false steps and—well, his hopes ran high.

He had been at home not more than a quarter of an hour when Dost called on the wire to say that, so far as the papers were concerned, everything was O. K.

"Now," the lawyer continued, "you had better get busy first thing to-morrow and find the sort of place we spoke about."

"I can give a look around at noon, or after work," Harvey said. "But—well—I'm a little short of jack. I'll have to cough up for the first week's rent, you know. And pay day is three days off."

"I'll meet you at lunch and slip you something," Dost promised. "Don't worry about that part of it."

"All right," said Harvey, relieved. "I'll see what's offered in the papers before I go to bed. Probably can land something right away as long as I don't intend to stay there."

"Sure. Easy. Well, good night." Dost hung up and Harvey turned to the furnished rooms column of the *Telegram*.

VII.

It must be admitted that Harvey's occasional contacts with Merle next day gave rise to certain qualms. The man whom he was about to victimize appeared distraught and half ill.

This was partly due to a heavy session of night work which had not ended until midnight, partly to worry over the plight of Clare.

Harvey stifled his self-reproach by thinking, "Well, nothing has happened yet," and "He'll never be any the worse off as long as he doesn't know about it."

He knew he was deluding himself. Plenty had happened and Merle would be a lot worse off. However, Mr. Sykes certainly

intended to see the thing through. In fact, he squirmed at the thought that Dost would probably insist upon that.

He had Harvey where he wanted him, in a way; could make matters very unpleasant for his associate, if he chose to do so. And Harvey did not doubt for an instant that the other would put on the screws if it should seem expedient for any reason. Dost had a big stake and Harvey knew he would not give it up.

At noon, he slipped out a bit early so to avoid explanations to Merle and hurried to the rendezvous Dost had mentioned. The latter was there already and at once plunged into the business that had brought them together.

"Pick up any old room, so long as the address sounds respectable," he instructed. "Get that letter written the minute you have done so. If you can find a place this noon, come around to my office after five and dope out your stuff there. In the meantime, find out how old Merle Wentworth is, exactly. Where he was born and all that. You can manage it one way or another. We may need that information later on; it's best to be prepared."

They lunched briefly and Harvey set out on his quest for a new address. He did not have far to search for what he required and before the time when he was due back at the office, he had engaged a room at 749 West Eleventh Street, a section which was not frequented by anybody he knew. He took the place in the name of Merle Wentworth, paid two weeks advance rent, and explained that he would occupy the quarters only spasmodically, when his business of traveling salesman permitted him to remain in New York.

His idea was to spend the night there occasionally and keep a few bits of personal property in the room. The landlady, Mrs. Keller, saw nothing strange in the transaction. Anyhow, she had her two weeks' rent in her hand and that was the main point.

That left Harvey free to proceed to Dost's office after work. But first he would try to get the information desired in reference to Merle's age and birthplace. In which connection, he had a bright thought

—an idea which would not make it necessary to consult Merle at all.

The plan was simplicity itself. All Harvey had to do was go into the filing department and consult the employment index. From the card in the name of Merle Wentworth, he copied the data required by Dost.

Merle was twenty-seven years of age—two years the junior of himself—and had been born in Templeton, Ohio, September 4, 1898. Harvey chuckled with satisfaction and returned to his work with a zest born of the knowledge that all was progressing perfectly.

When he reported to Dost, at five thirty, the latter was more than pleased. "Fine!" he said. "Now sit down and write that letter." He waved Harvey toward his desk.

Sykes wrote thoughtfully for a time and handed the result to the lawyer who scanned it carefully, made one or two minor changes. When the letter was finally ready, typed by Dost himself, it seemed to fill the bill perfectly:

CRAIG, CRAIG & CRAIG:
Edinburgh, Scotland.

Gentlemen—Your letter regarding the estate of Donald Wentworth, my great uncle, at hand. Naturally, it was a great surprise to me, for I had never seen Mr. Wentworth.

I am grateful to you for advising me and, in order that the settlement of the estate may be carried out expeditiously and in a proper manner, I have turned your letter over to my attorney, Mr. Emil Dost, of No. 987 William Street, New York City.

Mr. Dost will communicate with you at once, inclosing a power of attorney which I shall sign, giving him authority to act for me in all matters connected with the settlement of the estate.

I trust this will be satisfactory to you and remain,

Yours truly,
MERLE WENTWORTH.

"That's fine! That's all right!" Dost repeated as he sealed the envelope. "I'll shoot the other stuff along by the mail following that which carries this letter. Then we'll be all set. Gawd! What a pipe!"

"Looks all right," admitted Harvey nervously. "I hope nothing goes wrong."

"Oh, quit your crape-hanging and come out with me for a shot of hooch. I feel like blowing."

And the potential big-time swindlers departed for Dost's favorite speakeasy.

VIII.

IN spite of the efforts of Emil Dost to stiffen the backbone of his partner in crime, the latter found himself in a constant battle with the nervousness which bade fair to overwhelm him. At heart, Harvey Sykes was a coward and the knowledge that he could no longer retrace his steps in the matter of the Wentworth fortune, preyed upon him day and night.

All that consoled him for the time being was the daily contact with Merle and the thought of the advantage which the Wentworth money would give him over his rival.

Harvey kept a lynxlike watch on the personal mail basket, made sure of being at the office well in advance of opening time each morning. He ignored the gibes of his fellows over this sudden spurt of ambition; all that concerned him was to see that no letters from Scotland reached Merle Wentworth.

The height of gloomy foreboding was reached on the day when Dost showed him the letter he had prepared to send Craig, Craig & Craig. Dost had written:

I inclose herewith my authority to represent Mr. Merle Wentworth, both as attorney at law and attorney in fact, in connection with the estate of Donald Wentworth, late of Dundee. I understand that he already has advised you that his affairs are in my hands.

My client naturally is anxious to have the estate settled at the earliest date, and I shall be glad to coöperate with you to that end. Of course, my client will want you to represent him in Scotland and I might say he is prepared to be fair—even generous—as to terms.

I would like to have, if possible, a complete inventory of the estate, together with your opinion as to which items can be turned into cash at once. Also, information regarding the inheritance tax which will have to be paid the Crown.

Awaiting your advice in this matter, I am,
Yours very truly,
EMIL DOST.

That night Harvey cringed in his bed. He dreamed of being awakened by monstrous, cigar-chewing detectives and

dragged off to jail. The fact that his own letter had not yet reached its destination brought little comfort.

In the morning, on his way to work, he found himself actually glancing over his shoulder; he felt as if he were being followed by cold-eyed sleuths.

In the presence of Merle, he was uncomfortable and fidgety. He would have chosen to cut out the luncheon parties. But he dared not do anything which might indicate that something out of the ordinary had taken place.

He took to drinking more than usual. Only when he could feel the bracing effect of liquor did any degree of confidence assert itself. But with a few drinks under his belt and the calm assurance of Dost that all was secure, Harvey felt serene, almost jubilant.

He was sparing with the booze, however, on the occasions when he ventured to call on Clare. Always he brought her flowers or sweets and seized every possible opportunity of accompanying her to the hospital where her mother made steady, if slow, progress.

He slept in his new room on two successive nights and made himself agreeable to his landlady, who confided to a neighbor that Mr. Wentworth, her new lodger, was a "splendid young man."

Once or twice he and Merle ran into one another at the Hollis home and Harvey ruthlessly stifled his annoyance and mounting jealousy. He could see that the girl was fond of Merle, but had no evidence that she favored the other more than himself. At these times he was more convinced than ever that plenty of money would turn the scale.

That was the way matters stood when a number of things happened at once.

IX.

TROUBLE with a capital T stalked in the Wilmot office that Saturday morning. Out of a clear sky it came and spelled woe to more than one of the staff.

A terse bulletin, posted in the anteroom informed the employees that the company had been merged with the Bechwith Library

Bureau and it was regretfully announced that a considerable percentage of the staff would not be required in the new organization!

This, it was explained, cast no reflection whatever upon the characters or efficiency of those dropped; indeed, the selection of the unfortunates had been most difficult and painful. Those listed below would receive two weeks' extra pay from the cashier, after which they would be at liberty to look for new positions. That was the substance of it.

Boring into the snarl of humanity grouped about the bulletin board, Merle Wentworth learned of his hard luck. His name was on the list! And, rivals though they might be, Merle gleaned no consolation from the fact that Harvey, too, was out of a job!

The whole establishment, as might be expected, was in an uproar. Not outwardly. But over fully half the desks and counters, low-toned conversations were in progress.

Resentment, philosophical acceptance, despair—all of these had their part in the discussions. The telephones were choked with private calls while mother, brother, wife or sweetheart was told the worst.

Harvey did not know exactly how to take the blow. For him, it did not matter greatly. Dost would keep him in funds until their coup had succeeded.

But the fragments of decency which still clung precariously to his make-up rose in protest against this further punishment of his victim. And the strained look Merle wore when Harvey saw him did not help matters any.

It is quite likely that the latter would have been, at that moment, satisfied to be quit of the whole affair. But he was in it now much too deeply for escape, so he set his lips and tried to laugh off, with Merle, the news contained in the bulletin.

Merle was doing his best to take the jolt lightly, but at heart he was sick. In ordinary circumstances, it would have seemed tough but not particularly alarming; as it was, the thing was nothing less than tragic. Ever since Clare's mother had been hurt, Merle had pinched every nickel that came

into his hands. Even if Clare could not see what she would be up against very shortly, he could.

He knew that two weeks more would find the girl penniless, burdened with an expense which she could not possibly meet. He foresaw that she would be forced to choose between borrowing and charity. And, knowing what her choice would be, he meant to have sufficient cash available to tide her over the worst of it.

He would *make* her take the money, that was all!

And now—

To Harvey he said: "It's a rotten break. Any idea what you're going to do?"

Harvey laughed. "Same as the rest, I suppose; get another job."

"It's a bad time to land anything, just before the holidays," Merle told him.

"You're damn right it is. I don't know as I'll try until after the first of the year. I've got a little saved up. How are you fixed?"

"Oh, I've got a few dollars salted away but not enough to wait long for a new job."

A new fear smote Harvey at this stage. Now that he was no longer employed in the same office as Merle, he could not watch the mail.

Suppose a letter came from Edinburgh and was forwarded to Merle at his home address! Harvey swallowed dryly at the thought. It seemed to him a case for prayer.

He did not want to lose track of Merle just yet although he saw the advantage of what had come about, when his pending swindle had been accomplished. Now he said: "Suppose we kind of work together on this job business. Meet somewhere every day. I may hear of something that would interest you and the reverse might happen. We might avoid going to places where there is nothing doing, that way. What do you say?"

"All right," Merle agreed. "If one of us had been on a wild goose chase he could at least tip the other off. Sure. Where shall we meet?"

"How about that little grill in Chambers Street? It's handy to the section where most of the best prospects are."

"Good enough. Make it to-morrow noon, then. I'm going to beat it now."

"So long," Harvey said, gazing ruefully after Merle as the latter headed for the cashier's cage and the one hundred and twelve dollars and fifty cents which was coming to him.

Then it was that an office boy hurried to Sykes with: "Telephone, Mr. Sykes."

Dost was on the wire. "Can you get away long enough to run over here?" he asked.

Harvey laughed. "I'll say I can. Got fired this morning."

"Fired!" There was alarm in Dost's voice. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really. I'll tell you all about it. Be right over."

"Well, make it snappy." Dost hung up.

X.

It was with a vague sense of misgiving that Harvey Sykes made his way to the lawyer's office. Naturally, Dost had said nothing over the wire which would shed any light on the new development, whatever it might be.

But there had been in his voice a quality which led Harvey to believe that their plans had encountered something in the nature of a snag. And he was out of breath from his haste when he finally sank into a seat beside the attorney's desk.

"What's up now?" he demanded, scanning the other's face for an inkling of what was to come.

Dost smiled contemptuously. "All 'het up,' aren't you? You look as if you were about to be stood up against a wall and shot."

"Well, what's wrong?"

"There you go again. Because I ask you to come over here does it follow that something is wrong. Be reasonable, man. Use your bean. Nothing is wrong. We are just about to pass into another stage of our very nifty program. But before I go on, tell me how you happened to be canned."

Harvey explained in a few words. Dost nodded and said: "I'm not altogether sorry."

"I got to live, though," Harvey told him.

"Well, you've been living, haven't you? Not entirely on what you have earned, I might remind you. You can have what money you need. In fact—well, here's the letter I just received from the Craig boys."

He passed the communication across the desk, watched narrowly as Harvey read it. The latter trembled with excitement as he perused the typewritten sheet:

EMIL DOST, ESQ.,
987 William Street,
New York, U. S. A.

Dear Sir—Your letter in reference to the Wentworth estate, as well as that of Mr. Merle Wentworth, has come to hand. Also the power of attorney appears to be quite satisfactory. I inclose copy of the inventory and you will note that opposite each security, I have set down the present market value of same. This is for your guidance in case quotations on some of the items are not easily obtainable in New York.

The estate property, you will observe, is put in at twenty-two thousand pounds sterling. This, I may add, is a conservative estimate, in my opinion. There is, as you see, the sum of seventeen thousand pounds lying in bank. All, or any part of this is, of course, available for the use of your client.

There are, however, so many details to be settled in connection with the main bulk of the estate, that I would urge, in view of your desire to settle the business speedily, that you and Mr. Wentworth make a trip to Edinburgh. So much more can thus be accomplished in a short time than by post and cable. I think you will agree with me in this and the amount involved is sufficiently large to warrant such a journey.

In case this meets with your approval, you might cable me to that effect and, if funds are required, I shall be pleased to wire an advance of a thousand pounds—or whatever you may suggest—for expenses incidental to the undertaking.

Awaiting your decision and assuring you of our very best efforts in behalf of your client, I am

Yours faithfully,
DOUGLAS CRAIG.

"That's kinda putting it up to you, isn't it?" Harvey asked, eyes searching Dost's face. "Whew! How are you going to manage it?"

"By going!" Dost replied shortly.

Harvey jumped to his feet as if prodded by a pin. "Going! Are you crazy? Anyway, you don't mean that *I'm* to go!"

"Sure I do," the other snapped. "See here! Up to date everything has gone swimmingly, hasn't it?"

"I suppose so—except this," Harvey admitted, pointing to the letter. "How in hell," he added, "do you figure I could go?"

Dost ran his eyes over his companion.

"You've got to take a brace," he said, a little more amiably. "You're too much on edge. I tell you there isn't a thing to worry about. We're going to pull this off without a hitch. Only—only, you've got to get a better grip on yourself. *You* are the only possible snag in the works." He paused. "Ever sniff a little?" he inquired cautiously.

"A few times," Harvey told him. "It's a mug's game, though."

"Don't be silly. I'm not advocating it as a steady thing. But when a fellow needs something to steady him, that's another matter. You'd better have a shot now. It will clear your head for what I want to explain to you. You'll see."

"Oh, all right," Sykes said.

Dost brought forth a small phial, rolled a little of the white powder on the back of Harvey's hand. The youth, still trembling, sniffed it eagerly. Perhaps it really would steady his nerves.

"Stick that in your pocket," Dost ordered, tendering the bottle. Harvey took it.

The lawyer fussed about with some papers; Sykes waited, saying nothing. After a bit, Dost returned to the subject under consideration.

"You will probably agree with me in this," he said. "Not to follow Craig's advice would look bad. It might even arouse suspicion. Anybody who declines to make a trip to Europe to collect a matter of half a million dollars, would be looked upon as crazy. See?"

Harvey nodded. Dost continued: "Already I have started the ball rolling." He shoved an unsigned letter across the desk. "Here is a request to the town clerk of Templeton, Ohio, for a copy of Merle Wentworth's birth certificate, for legal purposes. You sign it with his name and shoot it along. When it comes, as it will immediate-

ly, I will arrange for the additional data required for your passport. Quite ordinary.

"Nobody in the State Department knows Merle Wentworth from a hole in the ground. You will go as Merle Wentworth, along with me. And we will clean up in a third of the time we would otherwise. It's fortunate that your father broke with his family when he came to this country; otherwise we could not get away with it. As it stands—it's a cinch! Stick your moniker on that letter."

While Dost had been talking, a gradual change had come over Harvey. The effects of the dope, creeping through his system, had, indeed, a steadying result.

Rapidly his brain cleared, doubts fled like mist before the rising sun. He followed Dost eagerly; saw for himself how simple the scheme really was. And when finally the lawyer concluded, Harvey was ready. He signed with a flourish.

"I get you," he said, grinning, "it's great stuff. You're a wonder, Emil. And, oh, boy! All that dough! Say! You're going to cable for some of it, aren't you?"

"I've already done so. A thousand pounds, as Craig mentioned. I thought it better not to ask for more, now. So by tomorrow, you can draw down twenty-five hundred dollars or so—less what I have already advanced you—and we'll be all square to date. We'll split expenses on the trip."

"Gosh, that's hitting 'em. Let's go out and eat. When do you suppose we'll get away?"

"Next week, sometime," Dost replied. "Just as soon as we can get the passports."

XI.

DURING the fortnight which elapsed before Harvey Sykes and Emil Dost actually sailed for England on the British steamer Bengal, the former had frequent recourse to the little phial which his fellow conspirator had given him. Harvey found it no trick at all to regain his ebbing confidence and justified himself by reasoning that using a stimulant in times of mental stress was nothing new. Most people did it.

He would have denied indignantly the

real truth that he was becoming a "snow-bird" with startling rapidity.

At that, he might not have cared a whole lot; the dope kept him cheerful, cool-headed—absolutely sure of himself. Why allow himself to slip again into those horrible fits of terrified foreboding which he had suffered at the outset, when a pinch of the magic powder would put everything right?

Furthermore, every vestige of regret at what he was doing to Merle Wentworth fled under the treatment. Who in hell was Merle to stand in the way of a "regular" guy like Harvey Sykes? P-ff!

And the scheme which Dost had outlined in the beginning unrolled beautifully and with a certainty that astonished Harvey and gratified the cock-sure attorney. The birth certificate came promptly; affidavits from two individuals who asserted they had known the applicant for many years, were available for passport purposes. Photographs of Harvey Sykes were duly attached and who in the passport bureau was there to say that these were not likenesses of Merle Wentworth?

Thus, to all intents and purposes, Harvey became Merle and when he boarded the Bengal along with Dost, he had almost come to regard himself in his new identity. Dost had seen to it that their names were not on the passenger list; one never could tell whose eye would scan that roster.

Craig had cabled the five thousand dollars as he had agreed and, with money in his pocket and a letter of credit for two thousand dollars, Harvey lolled in a steamer chair the first day out and decided he was at last coming into his own.

Lord! Ease and luxury for the rest of his life! That is—if he was careful.

There would be not less than a quarter of a million dollars for him and six per cent on that came to fifteen thousand a year. On which Harvey knew he could get along very sweetly—even go in for an occasional burst of hell-raising, if he so desired.

He never would dare tell Clare he had inherited so much money, he concluded at last. She would ask too many questions. Already he was counting Clare won! At any rate, Merle Wentworth was out of luck what with losing his job and all.

Fat chance of his winning out in the present circumstances. Certainly not before Harvey had cashed in and was again on the job.

He wondered just what he should say to people in explanation of his sudden affluence. He had been careful to keep his prospective trip abroad a dark secret.

He had met Merle but twice under the arrangement they made on the day when the Wilmot merger became known. He had called once on Clare. After that he had dropped out of sight, having mentioned somewhat vaguely that he had a line on a position in Philadelphia.

Just as well, he thought. And the confidences bred by the dope had washed out any fear that Merle would hear from the Craigs. Yes, matters were progressing nicely. Dost sauntered up and the two proceeded to the bar.

They had lined up comfortably and their drinks had been placed before them when Harvey suddenly stared, almost gasped in terror at the sight of a newcomer who entered the door, glanced around, then came swiftly toward where the pair stood, the light of recognition in his eyes as he bore straight down on Harvey!

The man was a habitué of a drinking place which Harvey frequented in Brooklyn, a chap who lived mostly by his wits. A little betting on the ponies, a bit of poker, fights and so on.

Sometimes he was flush, often on his uppers. Harvey rather liked him but he was the last person in the world he wanted to see now!

But there he was! There was no escape!

To Dost he said quickly, almost imploringly: "Here's a bird I know, slick article! What in hell shall I do?"

Now it was Dost's turn to be alarmed. This was a complication he had not reckoned on. He said: "Take it easy as if nothing was out of the way. Be nice. Tell him—ah—"

Max Griffen, the new arrival, slapped Harvey lightly on the back. "Well, well, well! What in hell you doin' here, you ol' buzzard?"

"Well, well, well, yourself! How come?" Harvey was sparring for time now. Then

he mumbled: "Meet my friend, Mr. Dost. He's an attorney, going over on some contracts, cotton contracts. I happened to be out of a job and he's taking me along to do some clerical work."

"H-m. Pleased t' meetcha, Mr. Dost. Pretty soft for you, Harvey," Griffen rumbled. "Sure I will. Double Scotch for mine."

Harvey looked about. No one had heard, he believed. But if this lad was going about shouting "Harvey" and "Sykes" all over the ship, there would be the devil to pay!

Dost took charge of the situation, deftly managed it so that they were able to break away in a reasonably short time. When he had Harvey by himself he said: "That settles it. You're booked for the stateroom the rest of the voyage. I'll tell this Griffen bird that you've got an upset of some sort, cramps or the like. He'll probably want to go down to see you, and that will be all right. He's not likely to say much about you outside. It's too bad, but there's no other way out of it. And we'll have to watch our step when we land."

For a few hours Harvey felt certain that they were undone, that exposure was just around the corner. But a generous allowance of the now indispensable "snow" and plenty of liquor set him up once more, and the days wore away without further alarming events.

Griffen did come to the stateroom, the number of which Dost had given him so that there would be no embarrassing inquiries about the whereabouts of Mr. Sykes. On these occasions Harvey groaned properly and Griffen sympathized.

Griffen, it seemed, was going to London to attend a series of bouts at the National Sporting Club, and was confident of a clean-up. Harvey paid little attention to his plans, but Dost made a point of learning enough so that he and Harvey would be fairly sure of avoiding each other during their stay in the British Isles.

XII.

MERLE WENTWORTH—the genuine—in the meantime was having rough sledding in his hunt for a position among the business

houses of Manhattan. The season was bad to begin with, and everywhere he found complaints that staffs were "top-heavy," as the potential employers put it.

To be sure, he could find work of sorts—cheap little jobs that any little moron could tackle and which carried a corresponding remuneration. None of these were to be considered by a capable young man who hoped to get anywhere.

Clare was more upset over his predicament than himself. She almost wept when he told her about the shake-up at Wilmot's, and insisted on having a daily report in regard to his progress in securing something else.

Poor kid, Merle thought, herself facing a situation which he regarded as impossible, but still ready to help him.

Merle shuddered at the thought of those hospital bills, ground his teeth at his own helplessness. He could not induce Clare to admit that she was hard pressed, yet he knew that even now she was denying herself much that she really needed, that her mother might not want for the best. He cursed the luck that had crippled him financially just at this time, and he was sure that Clare must have a sneaking contempt for him—for a man of his age and physical fitness who couldn't make his way.

There was a somewhat bitter consolation in the fact that Harvey Sykes had dropped out of sight. Merle wondered how that young man was making out, if he had landed anything yet.

Harvey had seemed astonishingly optimistic on those two occasions when they had met. But Merle of course did not know the reason for the other's expansiveness.

It was at the end of a particularly discouraging day that good fortune finally came to Merle, came through a medium that thrilled him and at the same time caused him to feel unreasonably ashamed. Clare it was who brought it about, and Merle was happy because of that, because it was indicative of her interest in him and his affairs.

On the other hand, it shamed him to think that he had not been able to manage on his own, that with all her problems she should have to be saddled with his.

He came to her with a feeling that he never would have a job again. The great commercial machinery of the city—of the world, for that matter—was running smoothly, each cog doing its appointed work. And he, Merle Wentworth, was not needed.

Returning from the day's quest, through bright streets teeming with Christmas shoppers, it seemed to the young man that the problem he faced was much like persuading a baseball manager that he really should have ten men on the field instead of nine, or demanding a fifth hand in a bridge game.

Every taxicab had its driver, every subway car its guard. Each counter in the shops had somebody behind it, and in the offices at whose doors he had beaten every desk had been occupied. There was no spot where it looked as if a wedge might be driven in.

Yet when he saw the face of the girl he cared for more than his life and heard her say, "Oh, Merle, I have some wonderful news for you," then he knew that she had discovered a vulnerable place in the hard, glistening, smug fabric of business—something he had been unable to do for himself.

"You see," she went on excitedly, "I have made it a point to ask people if they know of an opening for a—a-hem—worthy young man. And to-day I spoke to a Mr. Porterfield. He is general manager of the New York office of the L. M. & O. Railroad, and a great friend of my boss."

"You mean to say you braced him out of a clear sky—about a job for me?"

"Of course. And he thought a minute; then said that, by George, he thought he *did* have a place. Needed a good man in the transfer clerk's office. Also, Gloomy Gus, you are to go down there at ten in the morning! And if you don't land this, I'll box your ears and never speak to you again!"

"Land it! Clare! I don't know how to thank you. I—"

Words would not come. More than ever did he want to gather this wonderful, dear girl in his arms. And to do so was more than ever impossible. Gosh! Imagine!

"Darling! You have found a job for me. I love you!" Think of it!

Well, he'd get the place, and he'd make good too! After that—he would see.

Merle landed with both feet, next morning. Assistant to the transfer clerk; forty-five a week to begin. It did not seem possible.

Yesterday out of work, bemoaning the loss of a thirty-seven-dollar post that had no future. To-day, all set at forty-five dollars, with something better in the offing if he proved satisfactory.

It was a miracle, a miracle wrought by a girl who was a miracle in herself.

Merle felt very humble and grateful and happy.

XIII.

LARGELY through the strategy of Dost, he and Harvey slipped ashore without encountering Griffen when the ship landed at Southampton. And on the arrival of the boat train at Waterloo Station in London they hastened off in a taxicab to the Hyde Park Hotel, where they knew the chance of meeting the fight fan was very slight.

They would be taking the morning train for Edinburgh, anyway, and such sight-seeing as they might fancy in London could wait until the business with Craig, Craig & Craig had been attended to. Accordingly, they spent most of the time in the bar, lingered over dinner, and put in a solid night's sleep.

Aside from his nervousness, which called for rather generous "medical" treatment, Harvey felt very fit when they had settled themselves for the long journey to the north.

"You see, kid," Dost bragged as they sped along, "everything is breaking as I said it would. Gotta admit that—not?"

"I admit that, all right," Harvey returned, waxed enthusiastic. "Hell's bells, Emil, we're going to make a killing, just as you said! Damned if we're not! I can't believe it yet, though."

"Well, you believe those yellow babies you've got in your jeans, don't you?"

"I've got to," Harvey grinned. "They are the real thing, without a doubt."

"The best of it is that they're only a spit in the ocean. Wonder what sort of a bird this Douglas Craig is. If he's like his letters, I'll know how to handle him. Nice, fussy old party, I guess. Wants all the commas in the right places, and blots everything twice."

Which, on the whole, was not a bad summary on the part of the erudite Mr. Dost.

Mr. Douglas Craig met them at the Waverly Station, singled them out unerringly, and led them to his antiquated Buick car, which he drove himself.

"Weel-come, gentlemen. Weel-come tae Edinburgh," he said in the broadest accent Harvey had ever heard—not excepting Harry Lauder.

"Thank you, sir," Dost replied politely. "It looks like a fine city, what we could see as we came in."

"'Tis a bonny spot indeed," Craig assured him. "Aye, a bonny spot. Ye'll enjoy it, I'm sure." He addressed himself to Harvey. "Yer uncle, bless his soul, could nae be coaxed awa' frae Scotland, not often awa' frae Dundee. Ye don't favor him, sir."

"No," Harvey returned quickly, "I resemble my mother's side of the family, I have been told." Feeling that he was approaching dangerous ground, he added: "But they're all gone now."

"Then ye hae a' th' responsibeel-ity of carryin' on, me lad."

Harvey sighed. "I suppose so."

He felt on the instant that the elderly solicitor did not approve of him, that he regarded him as a species of upstart. At the same time, he felt that he and Dost were perfectly safe.

There might be contempt aplenty in Craig's attitude; but there was nothing of suspicion. It was quite evident that the simple, honest-faced Scotsman accepted them for what they represented themselves to be.

Harvey felt relieved on that score.

"Ye'll no be wantin' tae talk business the day," Craig assumed. "An' we'll r-run ye o'er tae th' Caledonian, which I expect ye'll prefer-rr tae the others. I took th' liber-rty of bespeakin' accommodations for

ye there. I'd be delighted tae hae ye join me at ten—perhaps a drop o' somethin' first, eh?"

"Perhaps," laughed Dost. And they settled themselves while Craig drove slowly through Princes Street, and solemnly explained that it was, "nae doot," the finest street in the world.

The conspirators spent, in all, four rather hectic days in Scotland. Craig was exactly what he seemed, a blunt, honest man who never for an instant doubted that he was dealing with the proper parties. He insisted upon going minutely over every document with Dost, while Harvey looked on with little comment. Dost had warned his companion to leave the talking to him, and Harvey was only too glad to heed the advice.

All the securities belonging to the estate were examined, checked against the inventory. Craig dragged them off to Dundee to see the home of the late Donald Wentworth as well as certain other realty holdings. These Dost authorized him to put up for sale immediately.

When the travelers departed for London, on the first stage of their return journey, they were exultant. In the possession of Dost was more than four hundred thousand dollars in cash and negotiable securities, with every prospect that this amount would be augmented by at least one hundred and fifty thousand dollars more at an early date.

That they should embark on a little spree in London is not to be wondered at in the circumstances.

"We might catch a boat day after tomorrow," Dost said. "But I don't see the use of rushing. I'd like to linger where you can get a decent drink out in the open."

"Me, too," Harvey agreed. "Just for a few days. I'm damned anxious to get back home so I can drop this phony label I'm wearing, of course. But I don't mind being Merle Wentworth for a bit first."

"All right," Dost told him. "Let's cut in at the Savoy and have things right for a week. Everything's sewed up. Then we'll sail on the Majestic."

Very shortly, however, Emil Dost had occasion to regret this decision. Harvey, flushed with the success of their scheme, fuddled with liquor and dope, his pockets bursting with money, kept the smoke room attendants stepping at a lively pace for the next seventy-two hours.

At first his companion endeavored to restrain him, but the result was to render Harvey more headstrong than ever, and Dost gave it up as a bad job. He could only watch and pray that the other would not make any serious breaks.

It was, however, inevitable that the younger man should attract attention to himself. He insisted on buying drinks for all and sundry, and, to Dost's alarm, especially Americans, of whom there was a large sprinkling among the guests and the frequenters of the bar. And it was during the absence of Dost that Harvey, one afternoon, completely lost his head.

He had grown more and more expansive with the drinks he consumed, and the circle about his table had grown boisterously intimate. Confidences were in order. In reply to some remark, Harvey suddenly took occasion to declare himself.

"Hell!" he said loudly. "Le's start something. This is small time stuff. Le's go t' Paris. Le's go t' Berlin—r somewhere. All of us! I'll pay. I got lotsa jack—filthy with it. Jus' c'lected million pounds off a dead uncle, I did!"

There was an instant tightening up of the entire circle about the table. This was interesting.

Harvey was pressed for details. He entered upon a rambling story, punctuated with drinks and not entirely clear, but he was making fair progress toward telling the world that he was Merle Wentworth and had inherited a huge fortune.

Certainly he had impressed one of his listeners, because the latter, spying a newcomer who had just entered, called:

"Joe, come over here! Got a story for you."

A moment later he was saying: "Mr. Wentworth, meet Mr. Joe Carver. He's the correspondent for the New York *Blade*."

Harvey gazed owlishly at the newspaper

man, who turned for further information to the chap who had summoned him. He was jotting down notes when Dost put in an appearance.

It took the lawyer less than a minute to scent danger—a very tangible peril. And his nimble wits sprang into action.

He could foretell an extremely nasty aftermath if a story were cabled along the lines Mr. Carver was planning. It would be copied all over the United States. Good story, too.

Penniless American clerk coming into tremendous fortune through death of unknown uncle in Scotland. Whew! He could fancy Merle Wentworth reading that! Beads of perspiration broke out on the brow of Mr. Dost. Then he had it!

Quietly he drew Joe Carver aside. He indicated Harvey, smiled, and shrugged helplessly.

"Pretty bad, isn't he?" he inquired.

"He's accumulated a beaut!" allowed Mr. Carver. "You with him?"

"Yes. I'm his attorney. That's why I nabbed you. Want to be sure you've got the right dope—if you're going to send anything."

"I'm going to send something. Good yarn. Here's what I've got." He pulled out his crumpled notes and read: "'Young American, Merle Wentworth of New York, inherits million pounds from uncle he never saw.' What is it, Donald Wentworth, of Dundee?"

Dost laughed long and heartily.

"Good thing I checked you up," he said. "In the first place, get the name right. It's Earl Whitworth, not Merle Wentworth! And the uncle was on his mother's side—Baird MacDonald was his name and he lived in Perth, not Dundee. Earl is all mixed up, poor fish!"

Carver was busily correcting his notes. "Much obliged," he said. "Glad you put me right. How about the amount? That O. K.?"

"My Lord, no! What did you have? A million pounds? Whoops! My noble client is going wide and handsome! Twenty-five thousand dollars is more like it; between twenty-five and thirty thousand dollars. And if he keeps this up, it will

be nearer thirty cents when he lands in New York."

"Oh!" Carver looked disappointed. Dost knew then that the yarn, if any, would call for not more than ten lines.

He spirited Harvey away to his room when it became possible and, having applied vigorous sobering measures, proceeded to hand that young man a proper dressing down.

Harvey shuddered at the picture Dost painted of what might have resulted from his indiscretion had he not chanced to come in when he did.

"Gawd!" he said, "let's get out of this!"

"I'm for it," Dost told him, wiping his forehead again from force of habit. "And until we do sail, you're going to lie low. Get that?"

From that moment, until they were safely aboard the ship, Dost watched his charge like a cat. And his vigilance did not relax during the voyage.

Once in New York he sighed with relief, felt almost kindly toward the man who had almost accomplished the undoing of both. They shook hands and separated gladly; arranged to meet at Dost's place the next morning.

XIV.

CLARE HOLLIS was tidying the little apartment in Welling Place. She expected Merle along soon and they were going to the theater. The girl hummed snatches of divers melodies as she moved about, for she was happy. Her mother was improving rapidly and, just as the load seemed too heavy for her to carry, the hospital bills had been astonishingly cut by one half! In explanation of this, the superintendent had said: "You see, your mother has been here a long time and will be here for a considerable period still. We often reduce our terms in such cases; we don't want to rub it in, you know."

She smiled and patted Clare's hand.

But she did not say that the reduction was due to certain arrangements made between the institution and one Merle Wentworth, who now was shouldering half of the expense. She had agreed not to reveal that fact.

Thus it may be seen that these arrangements had nothing to do with the increasing tenderness Clare felt for Merle or with her singing happily as she waited for him to appear.

The bell rang and with more of a heart-flutter than she would have owned, Clare hastened to the door. To her utter surprise she found not Merle, but Harvey Sykes!

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed. "How you startled me!"

She was trying to conceal the disappointment that seized her for the instant.

Harvey grinned, offered his hand. "Handed you a surprise, didn't I?" he laughed. "Aren't you glad to see me?"

Clare was normal again by this time. "Of course I am," she said. "Come on in. Where on earth have you been? My, but you're looking well, Harvey."

There was truth in her statement. Harvey did look well. At least, his color was high and his clothes were new and fitted perfectly. There was, too, an assurance about his manner which had escaped Clare before.

She sat down and motioned him to a chair.

"Tell me," she said, "did you land that Philadelphia job? And is it all you hoped it would be?"

"No," he said. "I've been visiting some friends in Chicago and playing the stock market a little. I was lucky, too. Made quite a lot of money in Paxton Copper." He mentioned a stock which had risen spectacularly.

"Oh, how nice! You'll be a bloated millionaire next we know."

They talked generalities. He inquired about Merle and was told that the latter had obtained a place with the L. M. & O. Railroad, that he liked it.

But nothing they said registered with Harvey. He fidgeted, seemed absent-minded almost. All he could do was look at Clare.

She was more lovely, more desirable than ever, Harvey thought. Her charms and his ability to win them were vastly augmented by the narcotics he had absorbed. Life was a wonderful, pleasant experience.

Harvey suddenly said: "Oh, bother all

this, Clare. We're going to get married!" He rose and moved toward her and she stood up quickly.

"What on earth are you—" she began, but he cut her short.

"Just stating facts," he said, and laughed. "Why, I'm just mad about you, Clare. You know I am. I always have been. So—we're going to get married."

"Harvey, you're crazy! You—you're joking."

"Joking!" he exclaimed, a bit thickly. "Not for a minute. Why, I—oh, come here, Clare. You do love me a little, don't you?"

He held out his arms and she drew back. Something in the way he looked at her frightened the girl.

"Be sensible, Harvey," she said, trying to be matter-of-fact.

By way of answer, he took her hand, quickly, before she could escape and the touch of it caused him to lose his head entirely. Clare tried to withdraw her fingers, but Harvey tightened his grip and with a lightning maneuver, drew her to him.

His arms went about her shoulders and he tried to bring her lips to his!

Thoroughly alarmed, Clare ducked under his hands and backed away. Whereupon, Harvey flushed with anger and promptly pursued her. He paid no heed to her, "Please, Harvey, sit down! Please!"

He would have seized her again, but she evaded him by clever footwork and succeeded in reaching the door. Inflamed with the drug, he followed her into the hall just in time to see her run squarely into Merle Wentworth, who that moment came in from the street!

"Oh, oh, Merle!" Clare's voice was high-pitched and frightened.

Merle exclaimed: "What's the matter?" then recognized Harvey and that something was wrong at the same instant.

"He—he—has been—" Clare seemed on the verge of tears.

Merle thrust her gently to one side and strode to where Harvey stood.

"You'd better get out, Harvey," he announced.

"The hell you say," sneered the other. "Who's going to put me out?"

With which, now thoroughly beside himself, he launched himself at Merle.

"So you think you're the guy, do you?" he snarled, and slammed his fist into Merle's mouth!

Caught unawares, the latter gave way under the impact of the blow. But he recovered instantly and from then on, it was no fight!

Like a wolf he was at Harvey. Left to the nose, right to the jaw and before the bewildered dope artist knew what was happening he felt himself grasped roughly by the collar and propelled violently through the outer door!

"There!" Merle ejaculated as he returned to Clare who stood tremulously watching from the door of her apartment.

Just what happened in the next few moments, Merle never knew. But in the end, Clare was in his arms and between kisses she was telling him that, of course, she loved him and had for a long time and he was a silly not to have asked her to marry him ages ago!

What did she care about money? They could manage somehow and just think of being together all the time!

So Merle did think of it, and the thought almost frightened him—it was so precious!

XV.

MERLE WENTWORTH bent over his desk, busily engaged in mastering the daily grist of transfers. He attacked the pile with vigor.

Life was wonderful! The world was a grand place! He felt strong and capable and sure of himself. He felt tender, too, when he thought of Clare and of the amazing dream that was coming true!

He would work very hard. He would make a lot of money so that he could give Clare the things she ought to have.

Gosh! What a lot of wealth that pile of bonds under his hand represented. If only—

Merle stopped, thunderstruck at the sight of his own name, leaping, it seemed, at him from the bond he had just unfolded!

There it was—Merle Wentworth! Gosh! That was funny! Another Merle Went-

worth. Selling L. M. & O. fives, of 1946 to Ludlow Brothers!

Hello! Say! Merle examined the bond, stared open-mouthed at the history which the registration showed. Donald Wentworth, Estate of!

Something queer, very queer, here! He knew who Donald Wentworth was, his father's uncle. True he never had seen him and he did not know that the old man was dead. Also, he did not know that he had owned any bonds.

The name had been seldom mentioned back in Templeton, but—who was this Merle Wentworth, anyhow? He had understood his father to say that he was the last of the line.

Hastily, Merle ran through the lot of bonds. Thirty of them, one thousand dollars each. Gosh! Old Donald Wentworth had a bit of money, anyhow.

But these bonds, now. Indorsed by Craig, Craig and Craig, administrators of the estate of Donald Wentworth, to Merle Wentworth. Indorsed in blank by Merle Wentworth, by Emil Dost, attorney, and left for record by Ludlow Brothers, bankers of New Street.

There was something strange about the transaction, at least about the coincidence. Instead of completing the registration, Merle betook himself into the private office of Mr. Porterfield.

The latter was keenly interested and called the head of the transfer department. The bonds were brought in and Merle questioned closely in regard to his family history.

Finally Porterfield said: "Of course, it is possible that everything is straight, but it is extremely odd—odd enough to warrant an investigation. I'll have Cronin over from headquarters and get his views. Seems to me that this man, Dost, ought to be interviewed in any event. His power of attorney seems to be in order, but, well, let's have Cronin over."

An hour later, Merle, accompanied by Inspector Cronin and carefully instructed as to procedure, pushed open the door of Emil Dost's dreary sanctum. Dost looked up, a suggestion of alarm in his eyes. Then he rose.

"Who did you want to see?" he asked.

"Mr. Dost," Merle told him, adding: "Mr. Prince, here, is in the market for some L. M. & O. bonds. I'm with Selleck & Mays. We understand you have some for sale."

Dost treated himself to a deep breath. Obviously relieved, he stated: "I'm sorry. I had some to dispose of for a client, but they are sold. Perhaps you may be able to get them. Ludlow Brothers are the purchasers. You are not, by any chance interested in Kismet Copper bonds, are you?"

"I might be," the alleged Prince admitted. "How large a block have you? How soon could you make delivery?"

"I have twenty thousand for immediate delivery. In fact, the bonds are here in my office."

"Could I have a look at them. They are registered, I suppose?"

"Certainly." Dost disappeared behind the open door of his safe and returned with a packet of securities. One of these he handed to the inspector, Merle looking over the other's shoulder, again stared at his own name.

"Who," asked the inspector, softly, "is Merle Wentworth?"

"He's a client of mine," Dost declared.

"Where does he live?" The inspector's voice was crisp now.

"Why—er—that hardly concerns outside parties, does it?"

Cronin, who had been studying Dost's expression, suddenly flipped back the lapel of his coat and displayed a tiny shield of gold.

"You don't know me, Dost, but I know you! I'm Inspector Cronin! I've seen plenty of your dirty work around the courts. Now you come clean! I will make you acquainted with Mr. Merle Wentworth—this gentleman here!"

Dost's face went fairly green. His voice shook as he said: "Honest to God, inspector, I don't know that anything's wrong with these bonds. This young man may be Merle Wentworth for all I can say. But another man claiming to be of that name employed me as his attorney and I acted in good faith with him."

"H'm!" grunted the inspector. "Where is he, then—if he's anywhere?"

"He'll be here any minute," declared the frightened lawyer.

"In that case," said Cronin, "we'll wait. You might just sit back from your desk a little, Mr. Dost."

Slumped in his chair, his nimble brain seeking a loophole, Dost cowered. If he could even momentarily throw the blame on Harvey, he might gain enough time to flee. The jig was up and up with a vengeance!

His mind, a clutter of terrific thoughts, Merle sat beside the detective. What did it all mean? What would be the answer to the puzzle?

The inspector took no pains to conceal his contempt and scorn for the beady-eyed attorney. He knew the man was guilty of something or other.

Footsteps along the corridor, the door swung open and into the room stepped Harvey Sykes!

He stopped short, his eyes flew to those of Dost, to the police officer, to Merle who, jaw sagging, had sprung to his feet!

"You!" both of them cried at once.

Cronin inquired of Dost: "Is this Mr. Merle Wentworth? Introduce me."

Harvey waited to hear no more. With a wild glare as of a trapped animal, he broke for freedom. But the watchful inspector had him before he was halfway through the door.

He dragged the struggling form back, slammed it into a chair.

"You! Damn you!" blubbered Harvey, pointing a shaking finger at Dost. "You got me into this mess!"

"You lying swine!" Dost snarled. And there followed an insane chorus of accusations and counter charges.

Cronin settled it by saying: "Cut it out. Save your wind. You both can go over this at the station house. Get up, Dost, and keep your hands well up."

Later, when the inevitable confessions had been completed and the whereabouts of Donald Wentworth's property had been made clear, Merle asked for the balance of the day off—important private business!



Beyond the Stars.

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "The Man Who Mastered Time," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

LEONARD GRAY, captain of the *Liner 40 N.*, the greatest airship on earth, tells the story of a cruise he starts out on, in 1008, as one of the expeditions of Dr. Grafe Weatherby, the great scientist, to the regions beyond the stars. With them are also Jim Dunkirk, the greatest flying detective; blond Alice, and dark haired blind Dolores, granddaughters of Dr. Weatherby; and a stowaway named Lupe Perez, who wants to get off the earth because they want him there for murder. They travel in a projectile of Dr. Weatherby's invention to aid a distressed young man and woman who have been exchanging thought waves with Dolores. Gradually they realize they are becoming as large as the atoms in an infinitely enormous world.

CHAPTER V (Continued).

EMERGING FROM INFINITE SMALLNESS.

THEY aroused me from sleep some hours later, called me excitedly. I found them all in the instrument room crowded around Dolores who was sitting on the couch, her hands pressed against her forehead. Jim cried:

"She's getting thought-waves, Len! Some one is communicating with her!"

Dr. Weatherby was murmuring: "What is it, Dolores? Do you get it clearer now?"

"Yes. Some one is thinking: 'We can see you! We see you coming!'"

"Yes, Dolores. What else?"

"That's all. 'We're watching you! We can see you coming!'"

Jim murmured in a low voice: "The man on the cliff! The young man and the girl in distress!"

Dolores shook her head. "No. This is some one else. Closer. Stronger. The thoughts are very strong."

"Can't you see anything, Dolores?" Dr. Weatherby touched her. Shook her gently.

This story began in the *Argosy-Allstory Weekly* for February 11

"Try, child. Tell them to think about themselves."

"I see—" She stopped; then stammered. "I see—a light. A very big—light. There are people—"

"Men?"

"Yes. Men. Three or four men. Sitting near a light. It shines so white. It hurts—" But she put her hand, not to her eyes but to her temple. "I'm thinking to them, '*Why can't I see you? I want to see you!*' Wait. Now, I understand! He, some one thinks at me, '*Try your telescope! Haven't you a telescope? Soon you will see us. We have seen you for a very long time.*'"

Alice blurted out: "How long, Dolores? Ask them that."

"No," commanded Dr. Weatherby. "That's absurd! Dolores—"

But her hands had dropped from her forehead. "It's gone. I'm tired. My head is tired—"

Jim drew me to the window. "Look there! I was on watch. When this began appearing I called everybody. But then suddenly Dolores began getting the thoughts."

The scene outside was wholly changed. Beneath us, to the sides and ahead, a grayness stretched, a continuous, solid grayness. Elusive, formless, colorless; and I could not guess how distant it might be save that it stretched beyond the limits of my vision. But ahead and above us, the scene was not gray. A vague, luminous quality tinged the blackness up there. Luminous, as though a vague light were reflected.

There was no visible movement anywhere. But presently, as one staring at a great motionless cloud will see that its shape is changing, I began to see changes. The flat gray solidity was not flat, but hugely convex. And it was slowly turning. Huge convolutions of it were slowly as a cloud bank, taking new forms. And all of it was slowly moving backward.

Then we came to the end of it, Black emptiness ahead. Behind us was a gray-massed, globular cloud. Then another, its twin fellow, came rolling up beneath us in front—spread to the sides—shrank again behind us.

"Molecules," said Dr. Weatherby. "See how they're dwindling!"

I saw presently, swarms of them, always smaller. And ahead of us they seemed congealed into a gray solidity—a substance, it was passing beneath us, and to the sides.

Again quite unexpectedly, my viewpoint changed. I saw our vehicle plunging upward—its pointed bow held upward at an angle. A solidity was around us; to the sides, gray, smooth curtains; overhead a glow of white in a dead black void.

A black void? My heart leaped. That was not blackness up there above our bow! It was blue! Color! The first sight of color! A blue vista of distance, with light up there! Light and air!

Beside us the smooth gray walls were smooth no longer. Huge jagged rocks and boulders, a precipice! We seemed in some immense cañon, slowly floating upward. But it was a dwindling cañon. And then abruptly we emerged from it.

I saw its walls close together beneath us. An area of gray was down there; gray, with a white light on it. The light made sharp inky shadows on a tumbling naked waste of rock.

The gray area was shrinking to a blob—a blob of gray shining in a brilliant light.

The scene now was again wholly different. Overhead, like a huge flat disk of sun, was the light. Directly beneath us, stretching to the horizon on both sides, lay an undulating white level surface. The single blob of gray was down there on it. And off in the distance, where the surface seemed abruptly to end, gigantic blurs loomed into the blue sky.

Dr. Weatherby was calling me to the tower. I found him trembling with eagerness. "Leonard, I have the electro-telephone working. Look through it."

I gazed first through the front and overhead tower windows. The white disk filled a perceptible area of the sky. But it was not like a sun; it seemed rather a smooth, flat disk with light behind it, a white disk with a dark, narrow rim. Clear, cloudless sky was everywhere else. And very far away, behind and above the white disk, I saw a gigantic, formless, colorless shape towering into the blue of distance.

"Look through the telescope, Leonard!"

I gazed upward through the electro-telescope. Its condensing lens narrowed the whole gigantic scene into a small circular field of vision. I gasped. Wonderment, awe swept over me. The blue sky was the open space of a tremendously large room; I saw plainly its ceiling, floor and distant walls.

The giant shape was a man. He was bending forward over a table—the table was under me; the man's hunched shoulders and peering face were above me.

For an instant my mind failed to grasp it all. I swung the telescope field downward, sidewise, and up again. And then at last I understood. This was a room, with men grouped at this nearer end of it around the table—men of human form, intent faces framed with long, white hair.

The undulating surface over which our vehicle was floating, was a side of what seemed glass, a clear glass slide with a speck of gray rock lying in its center. And the white disk over us in the sky was the lower, small lens of the microscope through which these men were examining us!

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW REALM.

"YOU won't let them imprison me? You won't, will you, Len?"

"I don't know, Lupe. Really, I have no idea what they will do. It's entirely Jim's affair. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes. But—you do not think he's told any one here about me yet, do you?"

"No," I said. "He hadn't—yesterday. Why don't you ask him what he's going to do? Who could he have told but the Man of Language?"

"Is that what they call him?"

"Yes."

"If he—I mean Jim—would say nothing, I would work very hard for you—all of you. Miss Dolores says she would like that. And she believes when I say I did not mean to kill that man—back there in New York. I was drunk with the intoxicating ray—"

That accursed Frankston current! It was supposed to bring joy—hilarity—but it made most men demons! More than anything in the world, it had done harm to mankind.

"I did not mean to kill him, Len. I did not know what I was doing."

"The penalty, Lupe, is punishment by pain—very long pain each day for years. You know that?"

"Yes, I know." He relapsed into the moody, frightened silence which now was almost continually upon him.

We had been in the new realm some twenty days. I measure them thus—twenty times of sleep, and twice that many meals. But the daylight and darkness had each come but once.

Twenty days! So full of strange impressions I scarcely know how to recount them. Yet, after such a trip, they were days of almost normality.

Our vehicle beneath that microscope had grown rapidly in size. And with our expanding visual viewpoint—and the nearness of solid, motionless objects—its velocity seemed infinitely small. It barely floated past the microscope, settling to the floor of that huge room; and with a normal proportionate size, the Beta ray shut off, it came to rest.

They crowded around us—old men, loose-robed, and with flowing white hair; seamed, smooth, hairless faces; stern, but kindly; and eyes very bright and intelligent.

They were men smaller than I, frail and slight, with heads a trifle overlarge, and a skin very clear—a pallor, not of ill-health, but as though sunlight never had struck them.

They crowded around us, at first timid, then friendly; talking together excitedly in a strange, liquid tongue.

Dr. Weatherby tried to greet them and to shake hands. They understood neither his words, nor the gesture. But in a moment they comprehended. And shook hands—all of them with each of us—very solemnly.

The room had oval openings for windows; light was outside, but it seemed rather dim. Presently one of the men tried to herd us along the wall of the room.

"No!" said Dr. Weatherby. "Don't go! We must stay in the vehicle!"

But when we turned toward it the men resisted us with a sudden stubborn force.

"Don't!" I shouted. "Jim, stop that! We'd better go with them!" The old white-haired men seemed to have gone into a sudden panic of violence. They were pushing, shoving us. They obviously had little strength; but the commotion would draw others from outside.

We yielded, and they herded us down the long room. A panel slid aside. We crossed a long, narrow viaduct—a metallic bridge with high parapet sides. We seemed to be a hundred feet in the air.

I caught a vista of low-roofed buildings; verdure—giant flowers on the roofs; streets down there; and off in the distance a line of hills.

The air was soft and pleasant. Overhead was a blue sky, with gray-white masses of clouds. There seemed to be no sun. The light was stronger than twilight, but flat, shadowless.

At the opposite end of the viaduct the ground seemed rising to a hill. A small mound-shaped building was there—a house with a convex roof which had a leveled platform on one end, a platform banked with vivid flowers.

It seemed a two-storied building, built of smooth, dull-gray blocks. Balconies girdled it. There were windows, and a large lower doorway, with a broad flight of circular stairs leading up the hill to it.

Our viaduct led us into the second floor of the house. We entered upon a large room, an oval, two-storied room so that we found ourselves upon a sort of second-story platform, midway from floor to ceiling.

Low couches were here—a row of them with sliding panels of what might have been paper dividing them. The platform—this second story—was some thirty feet broadly oval. It had a low encircling railing; a spiral staircase led downward to the main floor of the apartment.

I saw furniture down there of strange, unnatural design; a metallic floor splashed with vivid mosaic pattern; a large gray frame, ornately carved, with a great num-

ber of long strings stretched across it, strings of different length. It seemed not unlike an enormous harp lying horizontal. Narrow windows, draped with dark gauze, were up near the ceiling. They admitted a dim light. This whole interior was dim, cool and silent. A peace, a restfulness pervaded it. And our captors—if captors they were—seemed more like proud hosts. They were all smiling.

But when they left a moment later, I fancied that they barred the door after them.

"Well," said Jim. "I can't say but that this is very nice. Let's look things over and then go to bed. I'm tired out, I can tell you that—say, Dolores, it just occurred to me—these fellows can't understand a word we say. But you were thinking thoughts to them awhile ago—and you understood each other. Why don't you try that now?"

It had occurred to me also. Why had these people understood Dolores's thoughts, when her words were incomprehensible? Were thoughts then the universal language? Tiny vibrations which each human brain amplified, transformed, into its own version of what we call words? It seemed so.

Dolores was clinging closely to Alice's hand. In these unfamiliar surroundings she was at a loss to move alone.

"I did," she answered Jim. "I tried—but there was so much noise—they could not hear me."

"Try now," said Dr. Weatherby.

"I will. I am." She stood motionless, hands to her forehead. "I'm trying—I think—" There was a long silence. "I think—yes, some one thought to me, '*The Man of Language will come to you.*'"

"Is that all, Dolores?"

"Yes—that's all. It's gone."

"The Man of Language!" Jim exclaimed. "An interpreter! That's all right. Dolores, what about that young man and girl who were in distress? They were out here, weren't they?"

"I don't know. I never get their thoughts now."

"Try."

"I have tried. They may—get mine. I can't say. But they never answer."

Who were they? Where were they? I wondered. And there was so much about this new realm to wonder over. These people—this city. A civilization. A nation? A world here, with stars in the sky—stars beyond those clouds I had seen overhead?

Such questions were idle. We said little more; and very soon, exhausted with all we had been through, we were asleep.

They brought us food, meals at intervals, strange food which now I shall not attempt to describe. But we found it palatable; soon we grew to like it.

Then a man came, whom afterward we learned to call the Man of Language. He was a venerable man; no one of us could determine his age. A thin, wizened body, slightly bent forward, no taller than Jim. He wore a single garment, a queerly flaring robe, beneath which his naked legs showed thin as sticks.

His face was smooth, hairless. But the hair on his head was luxuriant; creamy white, and long to his shoulders. His head, upon a stringy neck, was large, with a queer distended look, and with veins bulging upon his forehead.

Yet withal, he was not grotesque. A dignity sat upon him. His dark eyes were extraordinarily brilliant and restless. His smile of thin, pale lips was kindly, friendly. He shook hands with each of us. But he did not speak at first. He sat among us, with those restless eyes regarding, observing our every detail.

We soon found he knew no word of our language. He had come to learn it, to have us teach it to him. We were made aware, later, that all these people, compared to ourselves, had memories extraordinarily retentive. But this old man—he called himself Ren—was even for them, exceptional. His vocation was to learn, and to remember.

He began with simple objects: eyes, nose, and mouth; hands—a table, a bed. As though he were a child, we pointed out our eyes, and named them; one eye, two eyes, a finger, two, three, four fingers.

It seemed like a game. When we told him once, it was never forgotten. But it

was a game which to us, even under such conditions, soon became irksome. We were impatient. There was so much we wanted to know. And though we never tried to leave this building in which we were housed, it was obvious that we were virtually prisoners.

Ren came after every time of sleep. He stayed hours; his patience, his persistence were inexhaustible. We took turns with him—each of us for an hour or two at a time. Occasionally Dolores would try to make something clear by thinking it. But at telepathy he evidently was inept. It helped. But he did not like it.

Days passed. I call them days, but what astronomical measurements this world was governed, we did not know. After each time of sleep we seemed to notice the daylight outside growing dimmer. Then it was twilight, then night. There were stars! Remote stars up there in this sky! And the night lasted for what on earth might have been ten periods of our twenty-four-hour day.

Gradually Ren was talking to us, broken sentences at first, then with a flow surprisingly voluble. He used queerly precise phrases—occasionally a sentence inverted; and with a strange accent of pronunciation indescribable.

We had tried to question him when first he could talk. But he avoided telling us anything we wanted to know, save that once, at Dr. Weatherby's insistence, he assured us that our vehicle was safe. And that the small fragment of rock beneath the microscope—that tiny gray speck which held our universe, our earth—was under guard so that no harm could come to it.

Twenty days had gone by. The night had passed, and daylight had come again. And then Ren dropped his work of learning and talked with us freely. Even so, my own memory—my comprehension—only permitted at first an understanding of the fundamentals of what he said.

This was a city, the capital, the head city, of a nation. Its people had lived here on this globe since the dawn of their history, ascended from the beasts which even now roamed the air, the caves, forests, and the sea.

He smiled at us. "You, too," he said. "I can realize that you are of an origin the same."

He did indeed think we were of a human type very primitive. The men of science who had seen us coming out of infinite smallness beneath their microscope, had remarked upon it.

The small protuberance in the corner of our eyes, the remains of the beasts' third eyelid, the shape of our heads, our almost pointed ears—I noticed that his own were very nearly circular—our harsh voices; our thick, stocky, muscular bodies were indications that they remarked on.

We discussed it. But Jim interrupted. "How did your men of science know that we were coming out of that piece of gray rock?"

It had been partly by chance. The fragment of rock had been a portion of the interior wall of a room wherein scientific experiments were being made. Ren used our words, "Experiments in physics and chemistry."

One of the scientists had found himself receiving strange thought-waves. Ren described them. They were Dolores's thoughts. The scientists traced them with measuring instruments to the wall of the room, but could be no more exact than that.

Then, later, from a tiny protuberance of the wall, a glow was observed. It proved to be a sudden radio-activity; this protuberance of gray stone had become radiant. Electrons were streaming off from it. The scientists chipped it off the huge block of stone of which it was so small a part, and put it under a microscope. It was violently radio-active. And from it they observed a stream of red.

"Our Beta ray," Dr. Weatherby exclaimed. "Our voyage, the disturbance we set up made the substance give off its electrons."

"Yes," nodded Ren. "They think so. They examined it beneath the lens, and after a little while they saw you."

Alice said: "My sister was getting thoughts from here—" She told him about the mysterious young man and girl, threatened by some unknown danger, a strange

cliff, the young couple at bay upon a ledge, the valley beneath them filled with a nameless horror.

Ren's face clouded. "Yes. We have had thoughts from them. But now the thoughts have stopped. Those two are the children of our ruler. You would call him our king? They are the young prince and his sister, our princess.

"A year ago they both disappeared. A year—that is ten times daylight and darkness. We did not know why they went, or where. Run away, or perhaps stolen from us, for our king is very old and of health quite bad. Soon the prince will be king.

"But they disappeared. There is a very—a horrible, savage people in the forests beyond the great caves. You spoke it truly, my lady Alice. They are a nameless horror—we do not often speak of things like that. We fear our prince and princess may be there.

"And here at home there is a growing trouble as well. Our women—the young girls particularly—are very restless and agrieved. They do not like their lot in life. Some already are in rebellion.

"On the great island is a colony of virgins, where no man may go. We thought—we hope—that perhaps the virgins had stolen our prince and princess, to hold them as hostages that we may be forced to yield to the virgins' cause."

"The prince and the princess stolen," Jim exclaimed, "and you've done nothing about it?"

Ren smiled gently. "We have done a great deal, but to no purpose has it been as yet. We got the prince's thoughts. He was asking us for help. But he would not say what threatened, and he could not say where he was, for he did not know. And then the thoughts suddenly stopped.

"Oh, yes, we have searched. The island of the virgins was invaded. But the virgins—indeed no woman of our nation—will admit knowing anything of the prince. We have organized an army. All the nearer forests have been searched. And now—we are getting ready to invade the caves. But it is not easy to get men for our army. That nameless horror—"

His voice held an intonation almost gruesome. He changed the subject abruptly.

"Our king, very shortly now he will want to see you. He feels, perhaps you can aid us. You men—of strength—and these two young women—they might perhaps be of assistance in dealing with our virgins. But you will have to be examined, your minds gauged, so that we may know if your oath of allegiance is honorable."

"By the infernal, mine will be!" Jim exclaimed. "I'll go with your army to the caves—nameless horror, or not."

Lupe and I were sitting together, that morning when Lupe was wondering what his own fate would be. Jim, with Ren, presently joined us. And then Dr. Weatherby approached.

"Where are the girls?" he asked.

They were in another part of the building. I noticed Dr. Weatherby gazing downstairs with a furtive air, as though he had come here to join us, knowing the girls were not here, and not wanting them around.

Jim was saying: "You think, Ren, that to-morrow—I mean after our next sleep—that the king will want to see us?"

"Yes," answered Ren. "Perhaps to-morrow."

"Because," said Jim, "I want to get it over with. Say, after we swear we'll be honorable in our dealings with you—" His gaze, I think quite by chance, went to Lupe Perez, and Lupe shrank visibly before it. "When we've taken the oath," Jim added, "they'll let us out of here, won't they? If we're going to join your army—"

Dr. Weatherby sat down among us. He said to Ren: "You spoke of your king being in ill-health. Do you have much sickness, much disease, here?"

"No," replied the old man. "Our climate is healthy. Our people have always been so. There is very little—"

"I mean—perhaps you have doctors, men of medicine, who are quite skillful?"

"Yes. There are such. In the past they have been very learned. The records of our history—"

"And surgeons, perhaps—very skillful

surgeons?" Dr. Weatherby was leaning forward; his hands, locked in his lap, were trembling.

Ren said abruptly: "What do you mean?"

I found my heart beating fast. I could appreciate Dr. Weatherby's ill-concealed emotion, that he considered himself a failure, and his dream, his hope that out here beyond the stars Dolores's blindness could be cured. And now he was at the point of finding out. His voice held a pathetic quiver.

"I mean—my granddaughter, Dolores—she is blind, Ren. You know that. And she has always been blind, never seen the blessed light. In darkness always."

The old man nodded gravely. "That is so. It is very sorrowful. I have seen others here; it is a terrible affliction."

"But your surgeons, Ren. I have dared hope that she could be cured."

There was a moment of breathless silence. A pity for Dr. Weatherby swept me. Ren would shake his head; he would say: "No, she cannot."

He spoke. "Why, it could of course be done." He waved aside Dr. Weatherby's glad cry. "But you could not find any one who would give his eyes for hers. No one, in all our nation, would be willing to do that. It is horribly painful for the one who gives—no anæsthetic is possible. And it must be some one youthful; young, healthy eyes—"

He gazed at all of us. "You would not, would you? Or you? It is unthinkable, voluntarily to go into darkness. You would not do it, would you?"

Momentarily he seemed addressing me. My heart leaped. Would I, for any one, yield up my blessed sight? Would Jim?

Ren added quietly: "A transplantation of the optic nerve is fairly simple. But it gives sight to one person only by taking sight from another. Of course, if you had a volunteer—or some one who deserved the punishment—or some one to whom the lady Dolores was very dear—"

His sentence was never finished. Lupe Perez was on his feet. He said slowly:

"How about my eyes—will they be all right?"

Ren turned. "You mean you would do that? Do not be impulsive—think well of what you say."

Lupe's face was expressionless. "Bring your surgeons to examine me. I will do it."

CHAPTER VII.

THE SACRIFICE.

"ARE you sure she will see when they take the bandage off? Oh, Len, will she? Suppose she does not!"

"I think she will, Alice. They say she will. Every one thinks she will."

"But we don't know. I wish she'd awaken. We can take the bandage off then. Can we?"

"Yes. Dr. Weatherby will do it."

Alice tiptoed across the room and back. "She's still asleep. I wish she'd awaken. Will it have to be as dim as this in here?"

"Yes, I think so—dimmer, probably. They're afraid of the first light for her."

The first light! Soon, God willing, Dolores would see the first light. What a thrill, a wonderment, exaltation it would bring to her!

The operation had evidently created a widespread interest throughout the city. Surgeons had come, examined Lupe, and examined Dolores. Lupe's eyes were perfect. The operation, they said, would be successful.

We had not yet been out for our audience with the king. Nothing more had been said concerning it; the operation was all-absorbing. The city quite obviously was in an excitement over it, an excitement only surpassed by our own publicly unexplained presence.

Similar operations had been performed upon animals; but no human had been found willing to make such a sacrifice. Even the criminals were protected by the law against being forced into it.

They had taken little Dolores up to our roof-top, where from below a curious throng gazed up at her. And then taken Lupe. I heard the wild cheering. Lupe, when he returned, made no comment. But I could see always now the strain under which he was laboring.

Dolores protested when first she had been told. Then she demanded to be left alone with Lupe. But this we refused, and Lupe himself did not wish it. Studiously he avoided her. To him, Dr. Weatherby had said but a few sentences, with his hands on Lupe's shoulders.

"There is—nothing I can say, Lupe. Except—you will have my gratitude, my love—always. And whatever I can do to make up for what you are giving me—giving my little Dolores—" His voice broke; he turned away.

From across the room Jim called: "It will square him with the law."

Lupe whirled around. But his voice was quiet. "That is why I am doing it, of course."

They had taken Dolores and Lupe away. I sat obsessed by the vision of what was taking place. Dolores under the anæsthetic. But, Lupe, whose eyes would have been affected, could take no anæsthetic. In physical agony he was lying there. And when it was over, to be always in darkness.

I had wondered why they would not take one eye only, that each might see; but they had told me that it was impossible. One optic nerve taken away would leave the other to atrophy and die; nor would the lone one transplanted live more than a brief time.

Then they brought Dolores back. Her eyes were bandaged. And then Lupe, who was exhausted by his torture, fainted at last, and was now slumbering.

Hours passed. The healing fluid they said was very swift. When Dolores awoke we could remove the bandage. Alice and I sat whimpering together. In a room adjoining us Lupe lay unconscious.

Dr. Weatherby entered with Jim. Behind them, lingering near the doorway, was the surgeon. He said softly: "You can awaken her. A little less light. Then you can take the bandage off."

We awakened her gently. She sat up weakly, in bewilderment. "Oh, the bandage, yes—I remember now. They told me it was over; I was all right. And then I went to sleep."

We gathered around her. A flat gray

twilight was in the room. Dolores sat in the bed. Her long, dark tresses fell forward over her white shoulders.

My breath came fast. To see the light, form, color, the blessed world, for the first time!

Very slowly, gently, Dr. Weatherby unwound the bandage. It dropped from his trembling hands to the bed.

"Now, Dolores, open your eyes—just a little."

The dark lashes on her cheeks fluttered up, and closed instantly against the light. She could see! Dr. Weatherby cried: "You did see, Dolores—you did see!"

Her eyes opened again, timidly, fearfully. But they stayed open, glorious dark eyes, luminous, eyes that were seeing! Eyes with light in them.

They opened very wide. Surprised—wondering!

"I see! I see!" There were no words to express her emotion. Just surprise, and awe surging into her voice, stamped on her face. "I see! Jim, is that you, Jim? Why, that's Jim I see!" Her hand went to her eyes as though to clear a blurring vision. "That—must be Jim. Come here, Jim. I want to see you closer."

He fell on his knees beside the bed, and her hands went to his shoulders, his face, his hair.

"Jim, it is you! It looks like you! Oh, I'm so happy—so happy!"

I heard a sound behind me, Lupe's weak voice calling me from the other room. No one else heard it, or noticed me as I left the bedside.

Lupe's room was bright with daylight. No need here for cautious dimness. He lay on his couch, a bandage over his poor mutilated eyes. He had not been asleep; he had been listening to us outside.

"Is that you, Len? I heard Dolores. She's all right? She can see?"

"Yes, she can see, Lupe. Everything is fine."

"I'm so—glad." He had risen weakly on one elbow. He sank back, but at once rose again. "I want to take my bandage off also. It's light in here, isn't it, Len?"

"Yes," I said.

"Bright light? Daylight?"

"Yes."

He slowly unwound the bandage. His eyes, red-rimmed, stared at me, dark, dead eyes. Was it my fancy that they seemed expectant?

"Len—why—" His fumbling hands touched his eyes and found them open. "Len—why—"

His forehead wrinkled, puzzled. "Len—I'm looking at you, am I?"

"Yes—you're looking at me, Lupe."

"Oh!" He breathed it like a sigh. The single syllable. It held surprise, wonderment, terror, and despair.

"When do you suppose this king will see us, Len? How is Lupe?"

Lupe Perez was in there now, listening to Jim and me. We were going to the king, to swear allegiance. Then we would join the army—off to seek adventure, the danger trail, the golden argosy of fortune—the thrill of it which only youth can feel to its fullest zest. Blessed sight! But Lupe was condemned to eternal darkness.

"Poor Lupe," said Jim. "Takes a brave man to do what he did—I wish the king would see us. What did Ren say?"

I understood that our audience would be at any time. Ren was to let us know. Dolores had again fallen asleep. From where Jim and I sat I could see her bed, with Dr. Weatherby sitting there beside it.

Jim said: "When we once see the king and get out of here, things will look different—what's the old doc doing sitting there so long? He acted queer to me, Len; did you see his face when he knew that Dolores was cured?"

I never answered the question. We heard a sound from in there—a choking cry; and saw Dr. Weatherby with a hand clutching his throat.

"Len, what the infernal—"

We rushed in. Dr. Weatherby sat looking at us. He had torn the collar of his robe with convulsive fingers. He stared at us. And mumbled: "Len, why—Len, why, how foolish!" His hands were groping for the sides of his chair. "Len! I can't—I can't get up!" Terror was in his eyes. "I can't get up, Len! Why—"

Before we could reach him, his great head sagged to the high hunched shoulders. He twitched a little, then slumped inert.

I swung on Jim. "Go pound on the door! Tell them to let you out! Get Ren! Tell Ren to bring a doctor—surgeon—some one to help us!"

"He's—dead?"

"No! Unconscious; he may be dying. Get help. Where's Alice? Send her in here! Hurry, Jim!"

They believed that Dr. Weatherby was dying. He lay now in a room off our main apartment, still unconscious, lying with closed eyes, motionless save for the tiny stirring of his breath.

It was, by earthly standards of day and night, now late afternoon, a soft, pale daylight. After another time of sleep the long night would be upon us.

They could not say how long Dr. Weatherby would live. There seemed nothing to do for him. The shock of his joy over Dolores, the let-down of the tension under which he had been laboring, had brought a collapse. He would die, the end might come at any time; they did not think he would again be conscious.

One of us was constantly watching him. Alice was in there now; from this main room I could see the pale gold of her hair as she sat there, solemnly, sadly watching. Dolores and Lupe were up, sitting with Jim and me; Lupe, with red, mutilated eyes, his pale face puzzled as he groped with the unfamiliar darkness; Dolores, wondering at all she saw, frightened at the impending tragedy of her grandfather's death. Often she would gaze at Dr. Weatherby's still, white face, gaze as though not quite sure of what she saw.

In hushed tones, with the awe of death upon us, we sat talking. We were on the upper half-story of the apartment off which the small bedrooms opened. I heard the sound of the door downstairs; and heard Ren's voice: "How is he?"

I leaned over the balcony. "There is no change. Come up, Ren."

The old man mounted the incline stairs. With him was a young girl. He introduced her gravely:

"The daughter of my young brother, who now is dead. She is named Sonya—she is very proud that she has learned from me your language. Hold out your hand, child. They shake it for the greeting, you see?"

I took the girl's extended hand. She was the first woman we had seen of this new realm, and I regarded her curiously. She seemed of an age just before full maturity, a small girl—small as Dolores, slim, almost fragile of body, garbed in a single short garment, from neck to knees.

It was a sort of smock, of soft dull-red pleats, gathered with a girdle at the waist, high at the neck, with long, tight-fitting sleeves to the wrist. Over it was a long cloak of a heavier material, which she discarded upon entering.

Her legs were bare. On her feet were leather sandals. Her hair was long, and black as jet. Parted in the middle, it partially covered her ears, was caught by a thong at the back of her neck; and its long tresses, hanging nearly to her waist, were bound by a ribbonlike cord.

Her face was oval, with expressive dark eyes, and long black lashes; sensuous lips, I thought, but a mouth and chin that bespoke a firm character; a beautiful young girl; intelligent, perhaps beyond most of her race. And that she was modish was plain to be seen.

Her cloak had a jaunty cut to it, a lining of delicate fabric and contrasting color. Her smock was very tight at the throat, shoulders and sleeves; and tight across the bust to mould her youthful breast.

It fell not quite to her knees, and flared with a stiffly circular bottom. Her face carried the stamp of youth and health.

But it was not wholly as nature made it. Her eyebrows had been plucked to a thin, dark line. The lobes of her nostrils held an artificial touch of pink; her lips were perhaps more sensuous of line than nature made them.

She discarded her cloak, and stooped to remove the skin sandals from her feet. Upon her left leg, just above the knee, was clasped a broad, white metal band.

"I am glad to know the strangers." Her glance went to the room where Dr. Weath-

erby was lying. "But I intrude at a very sad time for you—"

She and Ren sat quietly down among us. Ren said abruptly:

"Our king, too, is ill. A very old man—" He shook his head dubiously.

"Oh," said Jim. "Well, then we—"

Sonya seemed to take the thought from him. "I have already told my uncle," she said quickly, "that you must swear your allegiance to the king at once. We need you—you men look very strong, very masterful—"

She said it frankly, merely as a statement of fact, but there was an unconscious admiration in her glance. "We need you—and we—perhaps need your girls." She said the last with a singular, enigmatic emphasis.

"Right," said Jim heartily. "You fix it up for us—get us the audience. I want to be out of here; we've been tied here like timekeepers in a tower."

I had noticed that for some minutes past the room seemed abnormally darkening. A distant sound was now audible—a rumbling mutter, like thunder.

At the end of our upper apartment a door gave into a balcony. We went there, stood at its railing, sheltered by the roof which jutted out over us. The sky had gone black, a great inky mass of cloud rolling up from the distant horizon.

Our dwelling here was set upon a hill-side slope. Before us lay the moundlike roofs of the houses, each with a leveled platform at one end banked with flowers. The houses were built of metal and stone. Small, spider viaducts occasionally connected them, spanning the streets like cobwebs.

Pedestrians were hurrying for shelter. A boat-shaped vehicle on small wheels, steered in front, pushed by a harnessed animal behind, went swiftly by. In the gathering darkness lights were beginning to wink on; a cone-shaped hanging light at our street corner cast a blue-white glare downward upon a railed triangular bed of flowers which stood in the open space of the intersecting, curving streets.

Again the distant thunder rumbled. And far off, over the roofs, a puff of green-

white light seemed to burst in the sky. In a moment came the accompanying thunder. The lightning had illumined the distant water off there, the Warm Sea which lapped against the outlying sections of the city.

Alice joined us, alarmed at the sudden darkness. "He is no different. Poor grandfather!"

"Shall I go stay in there?" asked Jim. But Ren shook his head. "I think it is not necessary for a time."

The storm broke upon the city in a breathlessness first, an oppression. My breathing was constrained. I gasped; and as the oppression intensified, I was soon panting.

A sinister hush lay on everything. The darkness was like night—but with a difference, an ominous, luminous undertone of green, a lurid cast which made our faces look ghastly.

The lightning soon was more frequent, not in bolts; rather were they explosive puffs of light, like green-white bombs bursting in the blackness overhead. The thunder was sharp as the crack of an ancient fire-arm. A report; but there was an electric sizzle to it, and it ended with a clatter like splintering glass.

The wind came with a roar; a sweep of warm wind from the sea, then hot like the blast from a furnace. And then the rain; it brought a saving coolness, a surging of water, a slanting curtain of green beads hung before us. The street was soon a mountain torrent, white water cascading down its center depression. The rain was heavy as a cloudburst, but it was brief. Ahead, the sky opened with a faint yellow glow. The green curtain of rain turned golden, falling beads of gold. A thinning curtain, soon it had vanished.

The storm swept past. The thunder was soon behind us; a great yellow radiance was ahead. A cool freshness was in the air, a sudden peace. And a calm silence which seemed to carry a quality almost religious: peace after turmoil; a soul at rest after the turgid strife of life.

It was wholly fancy on my part, yet in that instant I seemed to hear something. A faint pealing of bells? An organ, faint, intangible as a thought.

Sonya's hand gently touched my arm. She murmured: "The peace of death. Many who were very sick have died—and others soon will die from that storm."

Ren caught her words. "I'm afraid—you understand, Leonard—a storm is very bad for our sick ones—"

The darkness was lifting. Over the city that yellow radiance lay like a halo of gold. Beside me, Sonya was murmuring to herself, and no one but me heard her words:

"Our king will die. That is sure now. Our girls must act; it is now, or never!"

CHAPTER VIII.

REBELLING VIRGINS.

IT was from Sonya that we first learned any tangible details of this new realm.

She and I, with Dolores and Alice were seated by Dr. Weatherby's bedside. Two days had passed. His condition was unchanged; we were sure now that he would never regain consciousness. He seemed weaker than before the storm; but the little spark of remaining life, far down behind that masklike face, still lingered, reluctant to be extinguished.

The old king, too, since the storm, was more gravely ill than before. He had sent for us, so that at his bedside we might take the oath of service. Jim had gone with Ren; Lupe with a pathetic, wistful smile, had wanted to take the oath and had accompanied them. The rest of us remained beside the dying man. The end would come soon, at any time now doubtless.

I sat gazing at the white face, with its closed eyes and a breathing that barely trembled on its lips, a face, peaceful, but stern as it always was in repose. Down there behind that mask the spirit was lurking, making ready to depart, silently, unhurried, unconfused, calmly making ready to leave this home it had occupied so long. Mysterious business!

Sonya was talking softly. I turned from the bedside to regard her earnest face.

"This city," she was saying, "we call Kalima. There was an ancient tribe dwelt here—the chief, they thought he was a god. The god Kali—" She was addressing Alice,

but now she turned to me. "Our land lies in a great depression of this globe's surface. Once, perhaps, it was the bottom of some great sea. It rises into mountains everywhere. It is not large; we are less than a quarter of a million people. The caves are at the foothills—"

"You will hear more of them later." She had waved aside a question from Dolores. "On the Great Island not far from here, is what we call the Village of the Virgins—where now about three hundred of our girls are living in rebellion."

"Rebellion against the government?" I asked.

"Yes. Against the man-made laws." She smiled her quiet, grave smile. "You have come, you strangers, at a time to find our nation in what we girls think is a condition very grave. You, my friends, will understand very well what we girls are protesting against. And now, with our prince and princess vanished—and our king about to die, the time has come to—" She checked herself suddenly.

"Sonya," I said, "your uncle spoke of the prince and princess perhaps being stolen by the rebellious girls. He hopes so, of course—that Nameless Horror—"

She said hastily: "Let us not talk of that. Not now."

"I mean," I persisted, "if the virgins of the island had abducted the prince and princess, you would know about it, would you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Are you sure you would?" Alice asked.

"Quite sure." She was very earnest. "You see, I am—well, they call me one of the leaders."

I still persisted: "If you know anything about the prince and princess it would be very wrong to let an army of men go into danger seeking them."

"Yes," she agreed. Her gaze met mine squarely. "We girls know nothing about them. We are as greatly worried about them as the men."

Gazing into the limpid dark pools of her eyes, I could not doubt but that she was speaking the truth. I looked away, ashamed for a moment of my questions.

Sonya was fast winning Dolores and

Alice; that was plain to be seen. They sat close to her. Alice was regarding her with a blue-eyed gaze of quite obvious admiration. Dolores moved over on the low couch; her hand plucked at the hem of Sonya's smock as it lay just above her knees, and touched the smooth white metal band that encircled her leg.

"Sonya, what is that? Just for ornament? It's very pretty."

"No," she said. "Not altogether for ornament. Every woman wears one—" She brushed her fingers across it; her smile was quizzical. "It is, in fact—well, it had become almost a symbol of what we girls are striving for. The virgins' band. You see, it is quite unmarked; no man's name is engraved there—I'll explain in a moment."

"Our king, with twenty of his aged counsellors—my Uncle Ren is one of them—rule the nation. All old men. They make no new laws; the old laws are good enough for them. The guards—you would call them police—are all the army we have."

"They are all men—young, sturdy fellows who have no thought but to do what they are told. Which is right, of course. It is the laws which are wrong, inhuman. They are very old laws; they have come now to be customs, traditions, handed down from father to son."

Her tone was suddenly bitter. She gestured with a slim expressive hand. "I must talk more calmly. These things against which we now have come to open rebellion, were doubtless necessary at the beginning. The laws were made by men who knew no better."

"The difficulty is in the sex of our children. Out of three births, two on the average are females, only one is male. We have, therefore, twice as many women as men. Or at least, there would be twice as many, if— She checked herself again."

"Thus we have—I think my uncle said that on your earth it was termed polygamy. A man may marry more than one woman."

Dolores said impulsively: "Oh, I would not like that! It used to be a custom in many parts of our earth, but now only among savage races."

"We girls—of this generation—do not

like it either," said Sonya. "But that is a thing comparatively unimportant. A man sometimes loves his first wife too much to take another. We can all hope for a man like that."

Her voice turned very grave. "What we are rebelling against is far worse. Often our girl children—if they seemed not destined to be beautiful—are killed. The father does not wish the expense of too many girls."

"Girls or women are never allowed to work. They must only strive to be beautiful. And when they have at last reached the proper age, to get rid of them by marriage, the father must pay a large tax to the state."

"And so—some men kill their girl-children. It is legally a crime—not done openly—we find them sometimes, little white bodies washed up on the shore of the Warm Sea. And the father is tearful that his child wandered away and was drowned. But the mother knows! The law knows, too, but nothing is done about it."

"The mother knows!" Alice echoed. "And a woman continues to live with her husband knowing that?"

Sonya shrugged. "It is the custom. For generations women have been bred to expect it. Woman's allotted portion—to live, to suffer, and to die! Perhaps no woman could love her husband after that. But love in marriage is a vague and elusive thing. I think, sometimes, it only exists in our dreams, our dreams of what might be—but never will be."

She shook herself slightly. "But all men are not like that, of course. And a girl can always hope she will find one who is different. Some of us would not marry if we could help it, but the law says we must."

"At the age of twenty a girl must choose one of the men who has recorded his name as desiring her. Any man is legally eligible to do that. He may have no wife as yet; or he may have one wife, or several. If he has the necessary money for the tax—and deposits it with the government, his name is recorded."

"You see—" She was cynical now. "The government needs the money! And

it likes our girls to be beautiful. Fifty men may record their names as desiring a girl who is very beautiful.

"She can choose but one man. But the government only refunds half the money the others have deposited. It makes a lot of money on a very beautiful girl."

"A sort of lottery!" I exclaimed. "With women as the prizes."

"I do not understand," said Sonya. "But that is the way it is with us. Beautiful girls are profitable to the government. No girl-child who showed promises of beauty has ever been found murdered. The father would not dare; the government would not like that, for it would cut down the government's income."

"Beauty is most to be desired. But woman's beauty fades, and there are many female mouths to feed—and female bodies to clothe and house. It makes more work for the men; and the men do not like to work. And so—"

The cynicism left her voice; a hush fell upon her tragic words. "And so—when a woman can no longer bear children, when her beauty is going, then she is considered a burden."

"She has never been trained to work; she is useless, an expense."

Each year our old women are chosen—a certain number of them, depending on the birth-rate—are chosen to die. They are given a blanket, a little food, and are taken to a place we call Death Island. Left there alone. They live awhile; and then the food is gone and they die.

"I've seen them draw the death number! I've seen, on the island—their wasted bodies, lying huddled; somewhere, with reason fled, they have fought and torn at each other for the last remaining food!" Her voice choked. "But they go away—start for the island, so patient—so resigned."

"It is that for which we are in rebellion more than anything else! We of this generation now, cannot stand it. We—will not stand it—"

To my mind had come memories of the savages of our own earth, not so many centuries ago. They, too, had thought it expedient to leave aged members of their tribes to die. The visions Sonya was in-

voking to my imagination were horrible. I found my voice:

"Your men here, Sonya—surely they are not all against you girls? Your cause?"

"No," she said. "But how many are with us at heart, we do not know. And men are very strange. You cannot talk to them—they pretend you are not intelligent enough to be worthy of talking. My Uncle Ren—"

Kindly old Ren! It seemed so incongruous. She went on:

"He is like all the rest. It is not, from his viewpoint, inhuman. It is the way things always have been. His mother died that way. He says, 'Her life was ended.' He says he remembers—he was only a boy then—how she parted from him with a smile. He says that men—brave men—meet death that way. Their life is over; the creator calls them, and they go bravely."

"But," said Dolores, "the man who hands out the death numbers is not the creator—"

"Ah," said Sonya, "but if you told that to a man he would say you do not understand."

Her hand went to her leg. "You asked me about this band. It is placed upon us when we are just maturing. On it is engraved the name of the man we marry."

"If he divorces us, that is written here—and the name of the man who next takes us. Our marriage record—written plain that all may see!" Her fingers touched the band's smooth surface. "There is nothing on mine, as yet. And there never will be—unless we win our cause!"

"Alice said: 'Are you one of the rebels?'"

"I am—at heart—and am working with them. Technically, legally I am not. It is nearly a year yet—as you on your earth measure time—before I am of the age when I can be forced to marry."

"What have the girls done?" I asked. "Refused to marry?"

"Yes. About eighteen hundred of them. Most are just at the legal age. They left the cities, went to the Great Island, and there they have built themselves a village. They grow food there; they work; they

are self-supporting. To many old women, and a few girl-children, they have given sanctuary."

"And the government does nothing about it?" I exclaimed.

"They did—at first. Men were sent to the Virgins' Island to get some of the old women, but the girls forcibly resisted them. And some of the girls were killed. Nothing much has been done since. The government, I think, does not know what to do."

She was scornful. "Our girls are very beautiful. It would not be profitable to kill them—and our men are not murderers. Nobody wants to kill us. They don't know what to do. It is a new situation; nothing like that ever happened before, and so it confuses them. Many wealthy men desire us—men of influence—and those men want to settle the affair, compromise perhaps. But we will not compromise!"

Alice said: "You reach the marriage age in a year, Sonya? Have any men recorded their names for you?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "There were eight, I think, when I last went to the records."

"But you wouldn't marry any of them? Or perhaps I should not ask—"

"Why not? There is no secret in such things. One man whose name is recorded for me I love very dearly. Our prince—" She swung on me. "Oh, now you believe I do not know what has become of our Prince Atho—"

A sound from Dolores interrupted her. Dolores was sitting with hands to her forehead, and eyes closed. She murmured: "I—caught some one's thoughts! Now they come again."

We waited through a breathless silence. Then Dolores murmured: "The prince—you called him Atho? It is he!"

Sonya gripped her. "What is he thinking? Tell me! Tell me quickly!"

Then she, too, received the thoughts. She sat tense. "Oh! The princess is dead! Killed!"

"Killed!" echoed Dolores. Then her face went vague; she was getting nothing more. But evidently Sonya was still in communication. She cried involuntarily aloud: "Atho! Dearest, dearest Atho!

Where are you? Tell Sonya! Oh, he does not know! Or he cannot tell me! He says—" It was a stark whisper of horror. "He says soon he will be killed also."

She sprang to her feet, then abruptly sat down again. "Atho! Atho! Where are you?"

The communication broke. Her face went vague, puzzled, empty. And then despairing.

Beyond the window, in the street below the balcony, a sudden murmur of voices floated up to us. We went to the balcony. It was night now—a night of pale stars in a cloudless sky. Shouting people were coming up the street. They appeared in a moment at the bottom of the hill—a crowd of men—a hundred or more. They came forward, swept around the corner, and vanished. Above the babble was a single sentence. A man called it; others took it up.

Sonya murmured: "They say, 'Our king is dying! Our king is dying.' The secret is out now. And the princess dead! Death everywhere!"

Death everywhere. Again I sat at Dr. Weatherby's bedside. The three girls were murmuring together across the room. The shell which soon would no longer be Dr. Weatherby was of no different aspect than before; the face a little grayer, perhaps, with lips a faded blue. I stared at his blue-veined hands, lying there on his breast, stirring so lightly with the breath beneath them that the movement was barely visible.

Blue-veined hands! Within those veins, the blood still was moving. Soon it would pause; the ceaseless engine impelling it would be stilled forever. Awesome thoughts! Somewhere down there, behind the white mask of that face, the spirit we call life was hovering, stirring about, busy with its last duties.

The windows through which it had looked for so many years upon a mortal world were already closed. It was barring them now, fastening the shutters, leaving them, moving away, withdrawing the fires of its engine; cooling the heat.

Very busy, down in there! Yet I saw no sign. Busy closing its house, putting all in order, making ready to depart, per-

haps it was a little frightened. Perhaps even now it was huddling at the threshold of eternity—peeping out, dazzled by the light, eager yet timorous.

All so silent, so hidden from me as I sat gazing from above. Mysterious business! Awesome! Frightening!

Suddenly it occurred to me that Dr. Weatherby was dead. A finger had stirred, no more. But there was a change, a new emptiness to the mask, an aura of peace. The spirit perhaps had been less afraid as it took the step and gently closed the door behind it.

I straightened. Outside in the street a man was shouting again. The girls looked up from their whispering. I knew, and I was glad, that Dolores and Alice were absorbed in these things Sonya had to tell them. The shock of Dr. Weatherby's impending death had come to them when first they knew it was inevitable; and now they were absorbed in other tragedies.

The man in the street shouted again. And Sonya sprang from the couch.

"He says 'Our king is dead.'" She laughed hysterically. "Death everywhere! I must go to the Island of the Virgins. Will you come? I can take you. The virgins are ready! We must act at once!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE NAMELESS HORROR.

IT was the first time we had ever left this house in which virtually we had been imprisoned ever since our arrival. Ren had not returned with Jim and Lupe. If the king were really dead, there would be a great confusion at the castle; they might be detained indefinitely.

Sonya would not wait. "A few hours only," she urged. "Then we will be back. I will leave a message for my uncle and your friends." The first shock of Dr. Weatherby's death was over; there was no advantage in the girls remaining here.

We started finally. On the lower floor of the house we found long dark cloaks and donned them, with a queerly flat, mound-shaped hat for me and light scarfs to cover the girls' heads. The lower door

was open; Ren had left it so, knowing that Sonya would stay with us.

Technically we were prisoners; but Sonya paid scant ceremony now to that. The king was dead; our oath of allegiance to the nation could be taken for granted.

"My allegiance goes to you," Dolores said naively. "You girls." And Alice nodded.

"Yes," agreed Sonya. "But do not say so, openly. And you, my friend Leonard—you are a man—be careful what you say if you have any sympathy for our cause."

Sympathy! How mild a word, as again visions of what she had told us sprang before me! I felt at that moment that I was with these girls heart and soul. I did not know what was impending; nor could I guess what a strange part my own was to be!

In this residential section of the city there was at this hour no traffic in the street. The shouting crowd had disappeared. Sonya led us to the main street level. The pedestrian bridges were above us. A hurrying man shouted down at us. But Sonya ignored him.

An unnatural silence seemed to hang about the dark, somnolent city—as though it only seemed sleeping and were wide awake. A tenseness was in the air. The houses were dark, but in almost every window I fancied that figures were watching, faces peering out. It was not wholly fancy, for I saw some of them—women standing, peering expectant, frightened.

About the streets men were lurking. We passed a garden which had a soft, pale glow of light suffusing it. In a thicket of vivid flowers, I saw a man crouching, eying us. A tenseness was on Sonya; and a grimness. We hurried past the garden; the man did not move. On the metallic pavement along here our footsteps sounded very loud. We avoided the lights; mounted the hill for a block or two, then turned into a very narrow street of shadows.

The houses here—the backs of houses, I assumed—were blank, two-storied walls.

We passed each of them hurriedly; my heart was thumping. Sonya had said that these were merely back entrances to inner courtyards of the houses, but it seemed, to

my sharpened fancy, that in every one some horrible lurking thing was waiting to spring upon us.

Sonya was leading. She was taking us through a back way to her home, to get the vehicle which would transport us to the island. We were nearing the end of the alley; it opened ahead of us into a street with a dim glow of light illumining it. To our right, just ahead, was a courtyard entrance—a yawning cave-mouth of blackness.

We had almost reached it, when Sonya abruptly halted, checked our advance as though she had struck some invisible barrier; stopped, and shrank backward, pressing against us. And her hand in terror was over her mouth to stifle a scream.

I saw it then—what she was seeing. A thing, something monstrous, lurking in the blackness of that cavelike house entrance, a thing huge, of vague, grotesque outline, an upright thing, with a great, balloon-like head, bobbing from side to side, two eyes glowing in the darkness; and below them, where a neck might have been—two other smaller eyes, green, blazing points of fire.

In all my veins the blood seemed freezing; pricking needle-points of ice exuding through my pores; my scalp prickling at the hair-roots. I was stricken with fright and horror; but an instinct, so that I scarcely realized what I was doing, made me pull Sonya soundlessly backward; sweep all three of the girls behind me and downward. And as they sank to the pavement, I crouched tense in front of them.

The thing seemingly had not heard us, or seen us. It advanced out of the darkness of the doorway; and in the dimness of the outside light I saw it more clearly, a thing like a great upright animal—ten feet tall, perhaps—monstrously cast in human mold, with thick, bent legs; a long, thick trunk, with wide, powerful shoulders and a deep, bulging chest; and arms that dangled nearly to its knees.

Its head, no wider than its powerful neck, was small, round, and flat on top. There seemed a face; its tiny blazing eyes were plain in the darkness.

A two-headed thing! The small head was

bent forward; behind it, as though astride of the shoulders, was another head, balloon-like; huge—wider than the shoulders—a head seemingly inflated, distended; a large, flat face. The thing took a step; its large head wobbled as it moved.

I could feel Sonya clinging to me, trembling; but none of the girls had made a sound. We were in deep shadow; the thing evidently did not see us. It stood in an attitude as though listening—far away, dimly, the shouts of the crowd at the king's castle were audible—then the thing turned; with a noiseless swinging stride and dangling arms, it moved away from us, on along the alley.

My hand behind me kept the girls motionless. The thing came to the end of the narrow street, emerged into the glow of light there. It did not pause—the light obviously was not to its liking—it bounded sidewise, noiseless on padded feet, and was gone into the shadows.

But in that instant under the light, I had seen it more clearly. A giant, gorilla-like figure. A man! Black hair seemed upon its body; but the body was partially clothed; and I fancied I had seen a belt strapped about its waist, with dangling weapons.

The bobbling head astride upon its shoulders was very different from the rest of the thing. A bloated membrane? I got that impression. It seemed a smooth, dead-white skin; I thought I had seen distended veins on it.

And as the powerful body leaped, I fancied I saw thin little arms, four of them, hanging inert from the bloated head.

It was gone. I breathed again. Behind me the huddled girls were shuddering. At my ear, Sonya was whispering:

“The Nameless Horror!”

CHAPTER X.

THE FLIGHT TO THE VIRGINS' ISLAND

WE did not continue down that street. Sonya took us back; we turned another corner, and another; and soon were near her home. She had not swerved from her purpose to take us to

the Virgins' Island. This thing we had seen, was one of many of its kind which dwelt in the fastnesses of the mountains beyond the caves.

They never came out into the light; none, Sonya thought, had ever been seen more clearly than we had seen this one. No man of this realm, to Sonya's knowledge, had ever ventured into the caves to seek them out.

I could not understand such a condition. On earth, nothing had ever been so fearsome but that man had sought to destroy it. But these people were of a different cast of mind.

"Sonya," I demanded, "how long have these things been in the caves?"

"They were first seen only just before our prince—" She faltered over the word. "—just before our prince and princess vanished."

I did not answer that. But it brought me a new light. With what fatuous reasoning were these people ignoring a danger which had so recently appeared at their very threshold! A danger, which they had proclaimed unmentionable, like something too indelicate for even consideration!

To me it was nothing of the kind. A terrible danger, unquestionably, beings horrible, gruesome perhaps, but a rational, tangible danger.

We reached Sonya's home—a low, oval stone building, dark in its enshrouding garden of flower-trees. She led us aside, toward a small outbuilding. I suddenly paused

I was in sympathy with Sonya and her cause, but was not the plight of the prince a more important issue? Had I not better go and join Jim now, and follow the course we had planned?

We reached the dark, single-storied outbuilding. Sonya touched a switch; a soft glow showed inside. It was a square building of stone and metal; windows barred by a metal screening; a doorway with a hinged screen.

"Sonya," I said, "just what is this you propose doing?"

She regarded me. Alice and Dolores stood beside her; abruptly I found myself ranged against the three of them.

"Why," she said, "we are going to the Island of the Virgins. The girls are ready—we have been waiting—" She hesitated, then finished: "waiting for this chance which has come to-night."

"What chance? The king being ill, or dead?"

Her eyes flashed. "Yes. The girls are ready—they will come back with us."

She stood with shoulders squared, a defiant little figure before me. I said, more gently: "What are you girls planning to do, Sonya?"

I think she had already told Dolores and Alice. They moved closer as though to defend her. Alice flashed me a defiant look.

I repeated: "What are you planning to do?"

Her eyes held level. "It is not my secret. You are a man—I have no right to tell you." She added very slowly, but wholly without emotion: "I think—perhaps you had—better go back."

It struck me with a vague sense of shame. I felt like a deserter. Alice said calmly: "Are you going back, Len?" With what loyalty these girls already were banded against me! Little Dolores clutched me. "Don't do that, Leonard! Sonya, you misunderstand him—"

I tried to explain myself. "It's only because I thought the other course would be better for the prince," I finished. "How long will this take us, Sonya?"

Sudden tears were in her eyes. "I believe you! But you must know that I—least of all—would delay to help him I love! Mine is the better way—and we won't be long—a few hours at the most."

I yielded. "All right, Sonya. You know best."

We entered the building, a large room, divided by the metal screening into huge cages. A great commotion; the flapping of wings, greeted our entrance. Travel in this realm indeed was primitive. We were to go by air, on a gliding platform drawn by giant birds trained to harness.

Sonya pulled down a swinging tube of light from the ceiling and held it toward one of the cages. Eight giant birds were there, soft, gray-white, feathered bodies;

heads small, round, and bald with black top-knots like plumes.

They stood upon short legs, yet were as tall as myself. They seemed very gentle; they regarded us timorously, but curiously. They knew Sonya; as she entered the cage, they nuzzled with their beaks against her smock.

"Ah, Nana! They want sweets," she laughed. One, more bold, pecked at her pocket. She leaned, and with her shoulder heaved its great body away. Then she produced small pieces of sweetmeat, made them each take a piece decorously.

"They are well trained, you see?" She rested an arm against the great curving side of one of them; I could well imagine that on its broad soft back she could have ridden into the air. One had lazily opened its wings; a feathered spread of fifteen feet at least, graceful wings, gray-white, with tips that were solid black.

The platform was under an inclosure of the flat roof. Sonya rolled it out—a platform some ten feet long, by six wide. Soft furs covered its surface. It was mounted upon small wheels, with a frame set in small cylinders of compressed gas as cushions against the shock of landing.

Midway of the platform, underneath, was a cross rod. Sonya extended its sections sidewise, each jutting out some six feet beyond the platform edge. To each of the ends of this rod, a bird was harnessed. The other six were in two strings in front—three in a string, one in advance of the other.

There were reins for the leading birds, to pull their heads gently from one side to the other; a rein to pull downward on their feet; another rein, which when drawn upon, raised a cushion to press upward against the bird's throat.

It took Sonya only a few minutes to harness them. I had been inspecting the platform. It was built of a light metal framework, upon which a thin, strong membrane was stretched. The whole seemed light as a kite.

Beneath it, set in the space between its landing gear, was a system of small, flexible wings, and movable cones through which the air rushed. And there was a

horizontal and vertical rudder, with flexible tips. Flying skill was needed. There were several controls, near the front of the platform, where now the reins were held in a notched cross-bar.

"We are ready," said Sonya. She stretched upon her side on the fur covering of the platform, with the reins and the controls before her.

We took our places beside and behind her, lying at full length, arms crooked into leather straps to hold us. Sonya called to the birds. Eight of them as one, leaped upward. The great wings flapped. We moved, rolled across the roof; at its edge we lifted with a jerk.

The low housetop, the dark trees, other roofs, the dim city lights all slid downward into a blur of shadow. On a long slant, we headed upward into the starlit night.

I lay on my side, clinging to that swaying, leaping platform. The wind surged past, tearing away every sound save the flapping of those giant wings. A graceful bird on each side of me; two strings of them slanting upward in front; winging swiftly up into the night, drawing me after them. The dark world was lost and gone; the star-incrusted dome of the heavens encompassed everything.

This was not an air voyage; it was flying. The platform fluttered, slid over the air like some swiftly drawn kite. The heavens swung with a dizzy lurching. I gazed over the edge at the dark moving landscape far down.

The faint lights of the city showed a thinly built, suburban area; then the shore of a starlit sea ahead. Primitive flying, with the first startling strangeness of it gone, its romance swept over me, a magic carpet upon which I lay, magically flying over realms of mystery, a flight unreal; romantically miraculous. A magic world was down there, with wondrous things passing beneath me and my magic carpet.

I was brought back from roaming fancy. Dolores, lying beside me, was pulling at my shoulder. I caught her words before the wind snatched at them.

"Look, Leonard! There is the island!"

There was no fear of this flight upon Dolores's face; only an eager wonderment,

her mind struggling with these sights—romantic, awing to me, how much more so to her so newly emerged from a life-long darkness! "See the island, Leonard!"

We were, I suppose, no more than a thousand feet high. The shore of the sea was nearly beneath us, a dark curving shore of gray sand with gentle white waves rolling upon it. Beyond the shore, some ten miles out, a dark island showed. It seemed irregularly circular.

As we swept closer, its beach became visible, gray-white sand with white rollers. A tangle of vegetation was behind the beach, a forest jungle with the land sloping up over gentle foothills to a cone-shaped hill which occupied the island's center.

Our birds were descending, swooping down in a broad spiral. Alice cried, "I see the lights, Sonya! Is that the virgins' village?"

Along one shore of the island, yellow and blue spots of light were showing among the trees at the edge of the beach. It was all dim in the starlight. But abruptly there was a change. Far ahead, where the sea unbroken, reached the horizon of stars, a yellow glow had come to the sky. Sonya gestured. "The moon is rising."

It came with a startling abruptness. A great yellow world swung up, twice, three times, the visual size of our moon; a glowing yellow disk, marked with the dark configurations of its mountains. It rose horn-shaped, mounted straight up, slowly, but with a movement quite visible. The stars paled around it; a flood of yellow light lay upon the sea in a broad path of rippling gold.

The island was bathed in the golden flood. We were much closer to it now—swooping a few hundred feet above its beach which along here was broad and hard. The jungle was beside us, a fairyland of tropical verdure.

Warmed by the waters of the sea, and perhaps by hidden fires of the cone-shaped hill, the vegetation grew to giant size. A somnolent forest edged with gold; mysteriously dark, romantic, amorous, scented with spices and the heavy perfume of flowers.

We landed upon the beach where the warm waves were liquid gold beside low,

primitive, palm-thatched dwellings set like ground nests in the verdure.

With the rush of our flight gone, I felt a new warmth in the air. Upon my cheeks was the faint caressing breath of a warm breeze from the sea; it stirred the palm-fronds to amorous whispering.

White figures were drawn back from the beach to watch us land. They crowded forward into the moonlight, young girls, slim and white, with long, flowing black hair.

As I stood up and stepped from the platform to the sand, some of them scattered and fled with startled feminine cries into the enshrouded foliage. Others came shyly forward; crowded around us—golden nymphs in the moonlight, with a brief veil-like garment from shoulder to thigh.

They were surprised at me—a man—here upon their island. They crowded around Sonya; talking seemingly all at once; casting mistrustful glances at me, and glances of curiosity and friendliness at Alice and Dolores.

What Sonya said to them I could only guess. It caused an excitement; like fauns, many of them leaped away, running down the beach, scattering over the village. In the distance I could hear their cries, and other cries, shouts, a great activity beginning.

And presently there was heard the cheep of giant birds; the flapping of their wings as they were released from their cages and brought out to be harnessed. Far ahead down the beach, in the moonlight presently a crowd of the girls began rolling out a huge platform.

The few girls who remained with Sonya continued talking. They were tense now; but wholly composed, beautiful, intelligent-looking girls, most of them a year or so older than Sonya, and very much the same type. Upon the left leg of each, just above the knee, was a broad metal band.

The girls now were ignoring me. But Sonya called Dolores and Alice over, and it was obvious they were welcomed.

I saw presently, some of the older women. With a few little girls among them, they came to the edge of the forest and stood timidly regarding us—infancy and age, common fugitives.

Alice was gesturing toward the sky. I turned. Off there in the starlight, in the direction we had come, was a lone bird flying. In a moment I could see its wings.

Sonya called something; and added to Alice, "A girl arriving from Kalima."

The bird swooped in a great descending arc, a gray-white bird like those which had drawn our platform. Mounted upon its back was the figure of a girl, her arms clinging about its neck. It soared with poised wings; descended to the beach near us. The girl leaped to the sand; she called:

"Sonya! Sonya!"

They talked in their own language; then Sonya whirled to me. Her face had gone white.

"Alta—this girl—lives very near my Uncle Ren's house in Kalima. I do not mean our home—I mean that other house of his where you were living. Alta went there to see me."

She was talking swiftly; Alice and Dolores drew me to one side; a common feeling of disaster was upon us all.

"Alta found the door open and went in. She read my message to Uncle Ren, that we had come here to the island. She was leaving. In the street outside she heard voices; from the window she saw my Uncle Ren—with your Jim. And Lupe, blind Lupe was walking between them. They were nearly to the house.

"Then—a great black thing leaped upon them, a giant, with a great, wabbling head. What we saw, Leonard! The Nameless Horror! It leaped upon them—and there were two or three others of its kind! They seized my uncle, and Jim, and Lupe. Lifted them up, carried them off! She—Alta—took one of my birds, and came here to tell us!"

CHAPTER XI.

A MAN, TO PLAY A MAN'S PART.

I STOOD a moment, transfixed with horror. Alice's features had become as white as Sonya's. Dolores uttered a faint little cry, "Jim!"

"Sonya—" I began. But she had turned to give orders to the girls. They sped

away. I finished, "Sonya, you get me back, at once!"

"Yes," she agreed. "But you can do nothing—a stranger—you cannot talk our language—"

"I can, with you to interpret for me—"

She whirled upon Alta with other questions; then back to me. "More than ever, now, I must go through with our plans. Alta says the king is not dead. But dying—he will die any moment. We must get back—"

Down the beach the large platform was ready. A hundred girls or more were loading upon it. With a great flapping of the wings of its birds, it moved down the beach; rose into the air. It had four strings of ten birds each, with others harnessed in tandem all along its sides. Magnificently, it sailed upward, turned in a broad arc, and passed us high overhead.

From everywhere now the girls were rising. Another great platform, and still another. A score of smaller ones; and from the forest, a hundred or more individual birds, each with a lone rider.

They flapped up from among the palms; circled overhead, with their numbers augmenting until they headed away. The first platforms were now mere blobs in the starlight. A thousand girls, I estimated, were up there in flight.

We hurried to our platform. Again we were in the air. Below us still another platform was rising; around us, three or four mounted birds circled like a convoy. We took our place in the line and sped back to the city.

The king's castle stood upon a promontory where a narrow arm of the sea reached back into the city. It was a large turreted building of gray stone, built in a quadrangle, with an inner courtyard. Metallic bridges crossed the courtyard at each of its three stories.

There was a flat roof banked with flowers, and a mound-shaped inclosure portion, like an observatory dome. Balconies encircled the building at its second floor level. The one facing the water was broad, with a high railing.

From it a narrow, steep metal stairway

led to the ground. A broadly oval main doorway to the castle was near there. Below it, a wide crescent staircase of stone led down a hundred-foot terrace to the main gardens along the water. They were spreading gardens of beds of flowers, winding paths, and stretches of a firm, gray-blue sward, like closely clipped grass.

The castle was accessible at the front, down this hundred-foot staircase. But to the sides, and the rear, the descent to the surrounding city streets was walled with a sheer hundred-foot drop. Below the stone wall was an encircling street, beyond which were the city houses.

Sonya guided our flying platform in a wide circle over the castle. The yellow moonlight flooded the scene. The back street down there was empty, except for a few people hastening along it to reach the front, where all the crowd was gathered.

We swept lower, with another turn. The girls were landing in the lower front gardens, beneath the terrace, by the river. A throng of them was there. As the platforms came down, I could see the crowd of people scattering, a crowd from the city, mostly men. They scattered and then surged toward the steps of the main staircase, but none of them mounted it.

The stone staircase was empty. On the level stone area at its top, some fifty police were standing, guarding the main doorway. On the front, second-floor balcony, at the head of the steep metal stairway there, a few other guards were loitering.

The castle was lighted from within. A few lights showed at its upper oval windows, but I could see no sign of activity. On the roof-top, near the mound-inclosure, a group of old men were sitting, the king's counsellors.

Some of them were up, pacing back and forth, terrified, I had no doubt, at what they realized was an impending crisis, confused to know what they should do. A mound was over the head of the interior stairs to the roof. As we passed close above it, a man came suddenly up from below. I could see his frightened gesture. The others crowded around him.

We swept on, heading now for the front garden where we would land.

The news that Jim and Lupe were captured by those unknown menacing things which now I realized must be lurking everywhere, had changed my whole attitude.

In that moment of bitter realization of the plight into which we had fallen, I would gladly, had it been possible, have gathered our little band together and returned to the earth.

But it was not possible, and now upon me alone, our safety depended. I must decide—and decide at once—upon a course of action. Whatever I did, must be done alone. I knew it. In this sudden crisis—the strife between the sexes—even Alice and Dolores turned from me to Sonya.

I was silent during that brief return flight from the Virgins' Island. Only once I moved close to Sonya. We were then over the castle.

"Is the king dead, Sonya?"

"No. I do not think so."

I waited a moment. "Sonya, you girls are not armed?"

She said impulsively: "No. But in the underground rooms of the castle, the science weapons are stored. Once we get control of them—" She checked herself; but she had told me what I wanted to know. An arsenal under the castle! The weapons of a half-forgotten science of this decadent race, stored there! If the girls got control of it—

The thought made my heart sink. Well-meaning, but inexperienced girls, struggling grimly for whatever just cause, had no business with weapons like those!

I shuddered at the visions which surged to my imagination. Here in the city—fatuous, frightened old men controlling a government now menaced by crusading young girls! This was our condition, pitiable indeed, to oppose a savage, outside enemy!

Yet what was I to do? I pondered it until a vague possibility came to me. It gripped me. It seemed feasible. I believed I could accomplish it. With swiftness of action—power, dominance—I could carry it through. A grim exultation was upon me. A man, to play a man's part—

We landed with a swoop upon the moonlit garden sward. The girls crowded around

us, with a fringe of curious, apathetic men beyond them. Sonya turned to speak to Alice and Dolores. Near by was a dark path between beds of giant flowers. I slipped from the platform. With my cloak held before my face, I avoided the girls and plunged into the shadows of the flowered path.

The path was dark, cut off from the moonlight by a great bed of flowers rising high above my head. A group of men came toward me; I stepped between the flower-stalks, stood enshrouded in my cloak, my figure merged with the shadows, until the men had passed.

I caught a near glimpse of them. Young men, stalwart fellows, no doubt, according to the standards of their race. But not one of them was taller than my shoulder; and beside me, they were frail, delicate of build.

In a weaponless fight, I could doubtless have engaged two or three of them, and come off the victor. I am well over six feet, and powerfully built. On earth there was nothing remarkable in that; but here in this other world, I was almost of giant stature. I was a powerful, primitive man here. The thought brought me a confidence. If I could carry through what I planned!

The path turned into a dim street that encircled the rear of the castle where a hundred-foot wall rose sheer. It was very dark along here. I hurried forward with my cloak drawn around me.

I had at first thought vaguely that I might be able to get under the castle, into the arsenal through some postern gate along here. The arsenal was within this curving wall of stone. I passed such a gate now—a small, narrow opening, half the height of my upright body. But it was blocked solidly with a metal door which I could see no way of opening.

I passed on, heading back through the city to the house in which we had been held since our arrival. Behind that house, with a viaduct connecting them, was the laboratory in a room of which we had arrived. Our space-vehicle was there. I could not operate the vehicle, but it held a weapon I wanted.

I remembered that Jim had brought it. In the excitement of our arrival, the strangeness of everything, we had forgotten it, the Frazier beam, brought out by an Aberdeen physicist in 1994.

It had been designed for hunters of wild animals. It was of little use against humans, particularly of the higher mental type. But Jim in his work of capturing criminals, had several times used it with good effect. I believed that I could use it here.

I had left the castle behind me, and turned, somewhat dubiously, into another street. I was sure if I could get to Sonya's house, where so recently we had been, I could retrace my way from there. I had planned this while on the flying platform as we circled over the castle. I had been able then to identify Sonya's home, and to gauge the lay of the streets in between. I turned another corner. The street was brighter. A woman on a balcony gazed down at me. I encountered a man; he came abruptly out of a doorway before I could avoid him. I tensed myself to leap upon him if he barred my way. But he stared, and stepped aside. I went on.

Another corner. I saw and recognized Sonya's house. From there, my way was sure. Within twenty minutes after leaving the castle grounds, I was groping in the darkness back of the house where Dr. Weatherby's body lay.

It was near here that the nameless horrors had caught Jim, Lupe, and Ren. But I saw no signs of them now. The viaduct connecting the two buildings was a dark, thin line against the stars. The building I was hoping to enter was wholly dark. A two-story structure, the viaduct extended from its upper floor.

I prowled around. The lower window openings were all barred. The door oval was barred. A stairway led up from the ground to the viaduct. From the viaduct's platform I saw a cornice, too high for a normal man to reach; but I leaped for it, pulled myself up upon the dome-shaped roof of a turret.

A leap from here, and I was upon the main flat roof. There should be a door under a mound cover; most of the build-

ings had them. I located it; wrenched at its bar. It yielded. I went down a curving metal ladder, into the house.

In a moment I had located the laboratory room. Our vehicle in its full normal size, lay here, dead white, an end of it tinged yellow by a shaft of moonlight.

I stepped within it, went to Jim's cupboard, lighting a tiny battery light overhead. The Frazier weapon I sought, was here. Its *copite* cone, with smooth glistening bone handle; the women, *copite* headband; the tiny pulse-motor; the wires; it was all complete.

A triumph swept me. I was unarmed no longer. Playing a lone hand, here in this strange world; a man, comparatively of giant strength and physical power. But I was more than that now. I had a mental weapon, and the mental strength to use it.

I did not stop to adjust the apparatus; I wound it up in its wire, and hastily retreated. I reached the street; with the weapon under my cloak, I hurried back to the castle over the same route; I did not want to chance losing my way.

But as I advanced, I had more than memory of the streets to guide me. From the direction of the castle, a blur of cries was audible, a hum, a murmur, which as I progressed resolved itself into shouts. The shouting of a mob; heavy, angry voices of men; shrill cries of girls—a single, long, agonized scream of a girl.

I was on a lower street that fronted the water; a side entrance to the castle grounds was before me; through the trees I could see the frowning turreted walls of the castle. I stopped to adjust my weapon.

It took no more than a moment. Around my forehead, with hat discarded, I bound the headband, a narrow strip of finely woven *copite* wire, with two small electrodes pressing my temples.

On the right side two finely drawn silk-insulated wires dangled from the headband to my neck; I tucked them under my shirt, over my shoulder, down my right arm to the wrist. A band at my wrist, to which the wires were attached, held the tiny pulse-motor in place. My heart set it in motion, to generate the necessary current.

The Frazier projector was a *copite* cone, this one some ten inches long; its shape was a cone section, one end—the muzzle—with an open diameter of six inches, the other end, one-fifth inch, across which the diaphragm was fitted.

The bone handle screwed into place at the diaphragm. It was hollow; within it were amplifying tubes, and a transformer, miracles of smallness. The whole projector weighed some twenty Troy ounces. I plugged the two connecting wires from my wristband to its butt, gripped the handle, with my index finger along its side, resting on the trigger button.

I was ready! My heart was racing. The tiny motor at my wrist was racing; I could feel the hum of the current, the prickling of it under the forehead band, its tiny stabbing throb at the electrodes pressing my temples. There was power within me.

I had flung off my cloak; I stood in the white silk shirt, dark, short, tight trousers, and high, heavy, black stockings of my earth costume—stood with outflung arms for an instant and exulted in the wave of triumph which swept me. Against these people, the power of my weapon would be invincible.

Furtive no longer, I advanced with bold, open strides to the gate of the castle grounds. A few men were there, evidently about to enter. They stared at me. Before the strangeness of my aspect, the boldness of my flashing glance, they quailed, cried with fear and scattered before me.

I did not heed them. Beyond the gate, back from the water there was a rise of ground. I mounted it, and from the thicket of flowers that ornamented its top, gazed out at the moonlight scene.

Between my hillock and the foot of the broad staircase leading up the terrace to the castle entrance, a throng of men were standing.

Spectators, standing idle; occasionally a group of them would surge in one direction or other, milling about some individual who seemed abruptly determined upon a course of action; a mob without a leader; excited, aimless, striving for points of vantage to see what was taking place in front.



Damaged Reqs.

By ARTHUR EVAN JAMES

"THERE'S a telegram down to the station for ye, sheriff! I just heard old Crab Collins telling about it, down in the other end of town. Peg-legged Fletcher wanted him to bring it up to you, but old Collins told him he wasn't coming up this far. It's something about them two fellows what held up the Limited last spring!"

I dropped the paper I was reading and gaped at the barefooted kid like I couldn't believe either my ears or my eyes. Then, in a minute, I came to.

Jumping up from my swivel chair, I grabbed my ten-gallon hat from the desk and strapped on my big forty-five. Then I hustled out of the office without saying a word to the kid who trailed on behind.

But it wasn't that I meant to be short with the boy—my mind was all on what could be in that message. And you couldn't blame me, 'cause for the last three months, I'd been on the lookout, night and day, for them two fellows what had held up the Limited.

Theirs was the most cold-blooded job

that I'd ever had anything to do with during my more than twenty years of sherifffing. They hadn't been satisfied to flag the Limited in the gulch that dark night and rob the express car, after they'd cut it off from the rest of the train.

Not much! When they got all the boodle down alongside the tracks, they shot the engineer and fireman as dead as doornails. Then they locked the two express messengers up in their car and burned 'em up alive.

It took more than hard-boilers to do that—it took the bloodiest kind of devils, even if they wasn't taking any chances of anybody picking 'em out later.

Anyhow, horrible as it was, it seemed up to now that their scheme had worked out all right. Nobody on the coaches had caught a good look at the fiends before the cars were cut off, and as hard as we'd been trying for the past three months, we couldn't get an inkling as to who had pulled the job.

All we knew for certain was that two men had had a hand in it, but whether they was

short or tall, dark or light, young or old, you knew as much as we. So you see it was only natural that I'd be mighty anxious to learn what was in that telegram.

Once at the station, old Peg-legged, the telegraph tickler and station agent all in one, handed me the yellow message, remarking how it came over the wire just after he had opened up but that he hadn't been able to get ahold of any one that would bring it up to my office. All anxious-like, I read to myself:

DANIEL GRUBER, Sheriff,
Highridge, South Dakota:

The two bandits that staged the Limited holdup in your county last May have been apprehended here. Stool pigeon chanced to hear drunken conversation which led to their arrests and confessions.

One of the culprits is Red Garlow, the notorious train robber. The other gives the name of Joseph Robbins, but is not known to our department. The two prisoners, in charge of Detective Keeler, are now en route to Highridge and will arrive on train due at eight forty in the morning.

Be on hand to take charge of the situation. Keeler will give all details.

JOHN HAMPTON,
Chief, Sioux Falls Police Department.

When I read the telegram and learned that Red Garlow was one of the fellows what had held up the Limited, the whole business began to get more clear.

Red was the worstest, all-around, bad man that had ever hit these parts. While I'd never come within striking distance of him myself, I'd got his pedigree from them what had.

One of his bullets had crippled my old friend, Sandy Duncan over in Green Rivers, for life, not to mention the two brother sheriffs he'd bumped off, farther up the State.

His very name was a terror to all good, respectable folks, not only in the Black Hills but for hundreds of miles around.

A devil at heart but with a quick and sure trigger and all kinds of nerve, he'd managed to keep out of the reach of the law for years, robbing and killing all the time. And it didn't take much brains to figure that his partner, whoever he was, must be much like him.

Grabbing out my watch, I saw it was ten minutes after eight—only a half hour

until the train came in. I sure was tickled to death that they'd caught them devils clear across the State.

Hadn't every sheriff in the West been itching to get his hands on them two fiends? And in a few minutes, I'd have 'em in my own hoosegow, locked up tight!

I drew myself up to my full six feet, threw out my chest until I almost busted the buttons off of my gray flannel shirt, and stepped it off to the platform more like a youngster of twenty than an old, gray-haired fellow of fifty-six.

Once out in the air, I lighted my pipe and walked up and down the side of the tracks, stroking my beard, nervouslike, until the train came in sight.

It hadn't come to a dead stop before the conductor was off and I at his side.

"Sioux Falls wired you're bringing me a couple of prisoners," I spied. "What car are they on?"

The conductor scowled. "I'm sorry to tell you, sheriff, but you're not going to get a couple of prisoners—only one! The other fellow got away from the detective somehow, about fifteen miles back."

"Got away!" I gasps, taken clean off my pins. "How's that?"

"The detective must have been asleep on the job—that's the only thing I can make out of it!

"After Chief Hampton gave me three tickets to Highridge at the Sioux Falls station last night, telling me they were to cover one of his men with two prisoners in the stateroom of car five, I didn't even bother to open the door. The chief pointed them out as they were boarding the car, a tall, red-headed fellow handcuffed between two shorter ones. Handcuffed as they were, they seemed to be having some trouble in getting up the steps, a long way off from where we stood.

"That was the last I saw of any of them until the porter of car five came running to me, a few minutes ago, and said the detective back in his stateroom wanted to see me quick.

"Hustling to the rear, I found the detective swearing a blue streak between his shouts to stop the train. When I finally got head and tail of the matter—how his

other prisoner, the shorter one, had managed to slip out of the handcuffs somehow and jumped out of the window, almost five miles back—I naturally refused. We were almost into Highridge by this time and I'd likely lose my job if I delayed my schedule to return and pick up a dead crook. For the way the train was tearing along, you'll surely find him dead somewheres by the tracks.

"That detective didn't—" The conductor stopped short. "Here he comes now!"

Thinking it was just about as well to land the other fellow dead as alive, I glanced toward where the conductor was pointing.

A heavy-set, middle-aged man with sharp gray eyes and a full red face, dressed in a double-breasted blue suit and a gray slouch hat, was dragging a tall, red-haired, flannel-shirted fellow with a big, bushy mustache down the steps.

He had Red Garlow all right—I'd carried Red's description in my mind for years.

Rushing down the tracks, I grabs Red's guard by his free right hand, his other was handcuffed to his prisoner.

"I'm Sheriff Gruber, Mr. Keeler!" I opens up, anxious to get acquainted quick. "You sure had hard luck with that other devil—the conductor was just telling me about it. I was kind of figuring on a double trial that would knock the spots off of anything we've had around these parts in years. But now, it looks as if we got one of them funerals on hand long before we reckoned. The conductor's sure he's lying back along the tracks, smashed to death. The train was wheeling mighty fast, wasn't it?"

"It sure was! I'm not worrying so much about his not being dead as I am about my rep. You see, sheriff, they'll hold it against me, back at headquarters, no matter if Robbins has cashed in. There's no getting around the fact that I let a dangerous prisoner escape, and there's only dumb luck to thank that he isn't running around the country alive. And just about the time I was due for a nice boost—it sure is tough! I feel all broken up."

"Never mind, Mr. Keeler!" I salves, kind of pitying the fellow. "When you think of all the expense it 'll save the

county, it's the best thing that could have happened after all. Anyhow, the chief's more to blame than you are—sending two such devils clean across the State with only one man—don't you think so, Mr. Keeler?"

"Perhaps! But please cut out that 'Mr. Keeler,' sheriff! Call me Sam, then I'll feel more at home. If I ever needed any back-patting in my life, I need it now! And like as not, you're the only one I'll come to know while in this burg."

I laughed. "All right, Sam—just as you say! We'll lock this blood-thirsty butcher in the hoosegow, then we'll start down the tracks for the corpse."

At that, Red Garlow scowled hard and muttered something under his breath. I didn't like the look on his face a-tall and kept my hand near the butt of my gun. But when he didn't make a move, I spoke to him quietlike:

"This way, Red, and unless you're like your partner and don't want to live for a trial, don't try any tricks."

With Sam's pull on the handcuffs, Red started up the road, sullen and slow, while I fell in behind.

About twenty minutes later, after we had Red Garlow locked in the strongest cell in our little stone jail, me and Sam started out to bring in Robbins's corpse. It didn't take me long to borrow a handtruck from the railroad, and Sam and me was soon pumping down the tracks as fast as we could.

On the way down, Sam told me how it all happened.

It seemed Sam wasn't figuring to take any chances with them fellows and kept them handcuffed to him all the time. Red Garlow was handcuffed to both his own left wrist and Robbins's right. This left Sam's right hand free to draw his gun while Robbins's both hands were held close together by a third pair of nippers.

And in case any of their pals should board the train along the line, to help them escape, Sam locked the stateroom door from the inside.

He was all at sea just how Robbins had slipped out of them handcuffs, but slip out of them Robbins did, all unknown to Sam. Then Red hurled himself from the seat, to-

ward the door, pulling Sam down on the floor with him.

By the time Sam got out his gun and covered Red, Robbins had opened the window and jumped out.

Sam was still cussin' under his breath about it when we got to the spot where he thought it happened. Taking the truck off of the tracks, we each took a side and started to look for the corpse.

After we'd looked for all of two hours and couldn't find a thing. I began to suspect that Sam had got twisted in his bearings—that Robbins had jumped out farther down the road. But when I mentioned this to Sam, he got real peeved and said he was sure we must have covered the spot.

He pointed to a big bowlder, just a few feet from where we stood, and remarked how they was just passing that big rock when Red yanked him off the seat. And as we'd covered the ground for a good two miles back, it looked as if he was right.

Then on the way back to the truck, looking hard for some trace of Robbins all the time, it finally struck me that he hadn't been killed after all. And more than that, he couldn't have been hurt bad or he couldn't have managed to crawl out of our sight.

It seemed awfully strange with that train tearing along the tracks the way it did, but what else was I to think?

When I spit out my opinion to Sam, he was forced to agree that I must be right. Then he carried on worse than ever. He swore he'd never go back to headquarters and face the music until he got his man, pointing out that he must be hidden around somewhere in the brush.

He was bound we'd leave the tracks and start to look into the hills for him, he going one way while I went another.

But when I told him how there was too much ground in them hills for two men to cover, Sam seen I was talking sense. So when I mentioned how we'd go back to town and get up a posse, Sam fell right in line.

He started on a run up the tracks for the hand-truck, shouting that we mustn't lose any time.

Once back in Highridge, I left Sam to

shift for himself while I gathered up all the boys laying around loose. In a few minutes I had over twenty of 'em, armed to the teeth.

And this time we took horses and went racing down the side of the tracks. When we got to the spot Sam pointed out, we split up and plunged into the brush.

Knowing that a city detective wouldn't amount to much in picking up trails in the hills, I left Sam with a couple of old-timers, telling them to keep a close eye on him so's he wouldn't get lost. Then I followed close on behind Oklahoma Pete, a half-breed and one of the best trailers for miles about.

If there was any one who could lead me up to Robbins's hiding place, I figured it was Pete.

By sundown, in a little valley miles from the railroad tracks, me and Pete was forced to own up that we were licked. We had covered three ranges, crisscross for a wide sweep, and hadn't seen a footprint at all. We started back to the railroad, hoping some of the others had had better luck.

But when we pulled up to the rest of the bunch, waiting there in the dark alongside the tracks, we found that nobody had seen a single sign of our man. Sam was so sore about it that he raved fit to be tied.

He acted like he was out of his head—wanted us to keep on hunting all night. But when I explained to him how we could not find an elephant in the dark, once he got in them hills, Sam listened to reason.

So, telling the bunch we'd go back to town for a little grub and sleep, taking up the trail again as soon as it was light, we trotted back to Highridge.

On the way, I got to thinking over things, and didn't like 'em one bit more than Sam. As sheriff, I didn't like the idea of a fellow like Robbins running around loose in my territory. And running loose and whole he must be, else we'd had what was left of him by now.

Like as not, I told myself, he's got some pals around here, and he'll be heeled by morning. Then, there'll be a few more killings in my jurisdiction if I don't nail him quick.

And to tell the truth, I wasn't hankering after the job, knowing what I did about the devil and how I wasn't so sure on the trigger as I used to be.

But I'd done my duty for over twenty years, and I'd keep on doing it as long as I was sheriff—I made up my mind to that!

After we'd got back to town, and I'd taken Sam to my house to get a bite to eat, I remarked how I'd have to take a walk over to the jail and feed Red Garlow before I turned in. Sam said he'd go along with me, 'cause he was too worked up to sleep anyhow.

So we both took our hats and started down the road, I holding a lantern and leading the way, while Sam trailed on behind with Red's grub under his arm.

Opening the main door of the hoosegow, I set the lantern on the floor and picked out the key to Red's cell from the rest of the bunch. Then I whispered to Sam to keep his gun ready in case Red got obstreperous when I went in.

Calling to Red as I put the key in the lock, I never got a peep in return. Thinking that was awfully funny, I snatches the lantern from the floor and looks inside. And if I was ever flabbergasted in my life, I was then!

The cell was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, and the iron bars in the little outside window were sawed out clean!

"My God, Sam," I shouts, "Red's gone!"

"Gone!" Sam chokes, springing to the door, his eyes bulging out of his head and his face redder than ever.

"He sure has!" I spouted, never feeling any sorer in my life. "How do you suppose he managed it?"

Sam scratched his head.

"I've got it! Robbins got to town somehow while we were searching for him in the brush, and after it got dark he got hold of a back-saw somewhere and passed it into Red. You see the saw's still laying in the corner of the cell. Red must have cut his way out himself from the inside."

"Sounds—sounds reasonable," I stammers. "Let's take a look at that saw!"

Walking into the cell, I picks up the tool.

I knew right away where it belonged. I'd seen it many a time in Jim Lawson's blacksmith shop, just down the street. The handle was cracked and bound together with brass wire, so there was no mistaken it was Jim's.

And as Jim never thought of locking up his shop, it didn't take much figuring to see how Robbins had got hold of it, remembering how Jim had been in our posse all the while.

For a couple of minutes we stood gawking at each other like a pair of fools. Then Sam came to life.

"It looks like you're in bad, too, sheriff—both of us letting a prisoner escape!" he growls. "Cuss the luck, anyway! But we mustn't lose a minute of time—I'll never show up at headquarters until they're both caught."

"You're right, Sam. We'll have to get on the job mighty quick!" I tried to say cool like, but the words came out high and cracked.

It was an awful blow to realize how me and Sam between us had let both of them murdering devils get out of our mitts. It was by far the worst blotch that had ever smeared my official rep in all these years. I'd made myself the laughing-stock of the State.

But it wasn't only my pride that was troubling me. It was also the thoughts of what was likely to happen in my jurisdiction with both Garlow and Robbins loose.

Like as not, more than one poor fellow would lose his life, chancing to get in their path as they were making their get-away. And I'd be blamed for that. I went raving mad.

"You and that Robbins started this whole thing!" I shouted to Sam as I hurried out of the jail. "If you'd been on the job and hadn't let that devil get away, we'd never be in this fix. Red Garlow, or nobody else, could ever got out of my hoosegow without outside help. But when you let Robbins give you the slip, you gummed the whole works. If I ever get within gunshot of that dirty crook, he'll never live to go to court!"

"Don't fly off the handle so, sheriff!"

Sam whines, following at my heels. "It's bad enough to know that I let Robbins get away, without you rubbing it in. How's the best way to head off our man—that's the question now?"

"I'm going to gather up the posse again," I told him. "As soon as we get 'em together, we'll work in all directions from town. Maybe, even in the dark, some of us will pick up their trail. Or if we don't, we ought to have them hemmed in between us by morning, provided the boys move along fast. It's our only chance."

It was only a little while later when I had just thirty-two of the boys out of bed—more than we had before. And I was particular to see that Oklahoma Pete was among 'em. 'cause in the dark I figured more on him than all the rest put together.

After I had given Sam and the rest of the boys their instructions to spread out in all directions as fast as they could, figuring to close the devils in, me and Pete took a squint at the ground right under the window where Red had climbed out.

Each of us holding a lantern, we soon caught the spot where Red dropped. Then it didn't take us long to follow his trail across the cleared piece of ground in the back until it went into the woods. There we lost it for a time, but Pete finally picked it up some fifty yards in.

After that, it was fairly easy following for 'most four miles when we came to a creek. And at that creek we were stumped.

Hard as we tried in the dark, looking along the banks on both sides with our lanterns for a long stretch, we couldn't pick up Red's prints.

As it was now close on daylight, we set down to rest. While we were stretching ourselves out on the ground, Pete remarked how Red must have walked a long ways, either up or down the creek, right through the water, to throw us off his trail. That was an old trick, and it sounded mighty reasonable.

So I tells Pete that just as soon as it gets light, we'll walk along the creek, one up, the other down, until we finds where Mr. Garlow left the water. And when one of us comes to his footprints, he's to fire a shot as a signal to the other.

Pete thought that was good dope.

As the first streak of gray came over the hills, Pete was itching to be off. Seeing how his eyes were better than mine, I told him he could start up the stream, and in a few minutes, after it got lighter, I'd commence to work down. I watched him nosing around the banks on both sides until he disappeared from my sight, hidden in the mist rising from the water.

It wasn't more than ten minutes later when I got on the job myself. Wading right down the middle of the creek, I kept my eyes peeled on both banks.

I was still dragging along, through water and smooth stones, when the sun came out bright. But I hadn't seen the tiniest sign of Red Garlow. And I knew that Pete hadn't neither, for my ears had been strained for a shot all the time.

For a spell, I fell to wondering whether I'd better go back over my tracks or keep on. But I was so sure that I hadn't missed anything along the way that I finally decided to keep heading down. And just around the next bend in the creek I saw something that made me open my eyes.

It was a fresh broken limb of a bush overhanging the stream. And just below was a pool, likely 'most too deep to wade.

I was up to that spot in a jiffy, and it didn't take me long to see Red's footprints leading through the mud on the farther bank. Excited like and forgetting all about firing a signal to Pete, I followed those prints on a trot, my heart in my mouth.

But I was due for a jolt. In a little ways they turned into the creek again, leaving me almost as bad off as ever.

Plunging into the creek once more, I cast my eyes right and left, trying to pick up Red's tracks.

I guess it was because I was watching the banks more than the creek that I stepped into a deep hole. Anyhow, as I was trying to pull myself out, my foot slipped on a smooth rock and down I went. After I'd come up, sputtering and blowing, I made for the bank. And it was there that I discovered I'd lost my gun! It had slipped out of my holster somehow when I was churning around.

If that creek hadn't been so blamed

muddy, I'd have got it back without much trouble, 'cause I was a pretty good swimmer and diver even if I was getting old.

I dove into that pool all of a dozen times, but I couldn't see a single thing when I opened my eyes. Nor could my hands grab anything but stones.

Then I sat down on the bank, catching up in my breath and trying to figure whether I should follow Red unheeled or pass him up till I could get hold of a gun.

I'd about made up my mind that it would be wisest to turn back, when my eyes fell on a big, flat, smooth rock, running from the water to 'way up the bank, farther down stream. That 'd be just the place for Red to crawl out without leaving any traces!

So I walks down the side of the creek until I comes to the rock and examines the ground in the back of it. And sure enough, before I'd worked very far, I'd caught Red's prints in the earth. Then as they led through a lot of heavy brush, I knew it wouldn't be any trick to follow 'em farther.

But what was I to do if I did? I could not nab Red without a gun, 'cause it seemed probable he was well heeled by this time. His partner hadn't been running around loose for hours for nothing.

It was a good bet that he'd slipped him a six-shooter, along with the saw. And if I tried to nab him, it would likely to cost me my life.

I guess I'd have beat it back up the creek and tried to get hold of Pete if it hadn't struck me, all of a sudden, that Red's trail was leading back toward town. And when I got thinking over the matter, I soon saw that Pete was likely to be just as far away from me as Highridge was, and a darn sight harder to find.

So it seemed like the best plan to follow Red's trail, so long as it kept heading back toward town.

Of course I wasn't figuring on trying to make any pinch—not with a bird like him, and me without a gun. But I doped it out I'd be slick enough to follow the trail for a ways without Red getting wise. Then I could cut over to Highridge for another shooting iron, along with some of the boys, and come back and round him up.

Crawling along as quiet as I could, I followed Red's tracks through the brush. For almost a mile they seemed to lead straight back to town. Then they started to cut a little to the right, leaving me puzzled what to do.

There was an old cabin down in the hollow where Red's trail seemed to head for. Hadn't I better sneak down? It didn't seem I'd run much risk if I took it cautious like.

When I got in sight of the cabin, I creeps into a thick clump of bushes and gives it the once-over. It stood in a little clearing, its rough logs brightened with the morning sun.

As I took it in with all eyes, I got a hunch there was somebody inside of the cabin. The door was half open, and every now and then it seemed like I could catch some sort of a sound.

But even if there was, it didn't necessarily have to be Red. It might be some harmless traveler who had put up there for the night.

As I didn't like to turn back without knowing just who was in that cabin, I made up my mind to sneak a little closer. Even if it was Red, I figured, I'd take good care he'd never get his peepers on me.

So I crawls through the bushes and trees to the nearest point to the cabin where I couldn't be seen.

When I gets behind a low, thick scrub-pine, not more than a hundred feet from the back window, I parts the branches, careful like, and peeps in.

And what I saw gave me the joy of my life!

Bent over a little table, his head in his hands, sat Red Garlow! And that wasn't all—right in front of him stood Sam with a scowl on his face!

What luck! I wouldn't have to go back to town for a gun and the boys at all. Somehow, Sam had been smarter in the woods than I thought. He'd nailed Red Garlow all by his loneself while I'd been wasting my time stumbling through creeks and crawling through brush! I'd have to congratulate him right away.

Rushing across the little clearing and around to the door, I burst into the cabin.

"Fine work, Sam!" I sings out, a big smile on my face. "I've been following this cuss all through the night, but you beat me to it. Now, if I can only get hold of Robbins, we're all jake!"

Both Sam and Red looked at me, big-eyed, taken clean by surprise.

"It's lucky you landed him, Sam," I goes on, "'cause even after I got here I'd had to pass the job up on account of losing my gun. And while I was going back to town for another, like as not Red would have made a get-away."

"Lost your gun!" Sam says. "How?"

"Dropped it in the creek—gol-darn the luck!"

Sam smiled. "Don't worry! You'll never need it now."

"Don't need it now!" I spouted. "You seem to forget all about Robbins. We may need a whole storeful before we land that devil!"

"If you want a gun so bad, here's one!" Sam's hand reached to his hip.

The next second I got the worst jolt that was ever handed to any sheriff. I stood stiff as a post while cold sweat ran from underneath my big ten-gallon hat. My brain seemed to be freezing fast to my skull and my feet felt like lumps of ice.

There, staring me square in the face, was the muzzle of Sam's gun! And his finger was ready on the trigger.

"What—what's the matter, Sam?" I choked. "What's getting through you?"

Sam let loose a noise that sounded like a cross between a growl and a laugh. "You were just wishing you could get hold of Robbins, weren't you? Well, you have, sheriff—I'm him!"

If a fellow ever felt seasick on land, I did then! My brains, teeth and heart seemed to drop right down to the bottom of my stomach, never to come up. I guess I'd toppled over if I wasn't scared too stiff to move.

"You—Robbins!" I gasps. "I don't get the hang of things at all!"

Both Red and Sam let go a harsh laugh.

"Simple enough, sheriff," Sam went on, kind of smiling to himself. "You see, I just swapped places with that detective from Sioux Falls."

"Swapped places?" I wheezes.

"Sure—just about forty miles from Highridge! Me and Red managed to get the best of him in that stateroom, and while Red was choking off his wind I fished the key to the bracelets out of his vest pocket.

"After I'd got us all loose and Red finished choking him to sleep, we stripped that dick to his underwear. Then we bound him hand and foot with his own suspenders, opened the window, and waited for a river.

"It wasn't long before we came to a good one—wide, swift and deep. So as we were passing over the bridge we gave the dick a heave, tossing him plump into the water. And it 'll be a long time before they find his body—it must be in the Missouri by now.

"After that, I took off my own clothes and put on the dick's, we both being about the same size and build. And of course I didn't forget to keep his gun—that's what you're looking into now. Passing along a deep ravine, I pitched my clothes to the bottom.

"Then, after waiting a little while, I put the bracelets on Red, opened the door, and called to the porter. I knew the darky hadn't got a good look at us before—he'd been too busy juggling baggage in the dark when we got aboard, and the dick had kept the door locked from the time we pulled out."

"But what was your idea in handing over Red—never though you fellows double crossed each other like that?" I asks, getting interested in his story in spite of the gun sticking in my face.

"What else could we do, you fool? Do you suppose we were both going to jump out of the window with the train going that speed? Not much! And Highridge was the next station. We tried to get the conductor to stop the train before we got in, figuring to make our get-away, but it didn't work. So there was nothing left to do but keep on passing myself off for the detective and trust to luck I'd get a chance to free Red later.

"And I did, all right! When you were getting up your posse, to go down the

tracks, I slipped into a blacksmith shop and picked up a hacksaw. It was an easy matter to pass it through the barred window in the back to Red.

"All the time we fellows were searching around the hills Red was sawing away. And just after it got dark, he slipped out. I'd been there to join him right away if those two old-timers hadn't been watching me all the time. I could not give them the slip nohow—they was afraid I was going to get lost."

"But how comes you fellows are sticking so close to town?" I asks, weak like, my eyes blinking as Sam juggled the gun.

Sam scowled.

"We were figuring on making our getaway on the hand-truck that you and me took down the tracks yesterday. But Red lost his bearings in the dark, and never showed up here until it was light. And we can't risk getting hold of that truck in the daytime.

"We were just chewing the rag, when you walked in, whether it would be better to lay low here until dark and grab the truck to-night, or start right away to pull up farther into the hills. Seems to me, we'd better wait, for your posse will never think of looking for us so close to town. But if we go farther up into the hills we're liable to run into them."

"Then you had it all fixed, when you left the saw, to meet in this cabin after the posse got under way?" I wheezes, beginning to see through the whole thing.

"Right you are, sheriff! At the time Red and me held up the Limited, we got to know this country pretty well. We stayed right here in this cabin for two days before we pulled the job. So, you see, it's kind of like home to us.

"I never thought Red would have any trouble finding it, even if he did go a round-about way to throw you off the scent. Of course, it was easy for me, coming straight from town."

"I wouldn't had a bit of trouble either, if I hadn't wanted to travel that creek for a long piece, to throw you off my trail," Red growls. "That's where I got all balled up!"

By this time I was doing some tall think-

ing. When I saw how I was about the dumbest two-legged critter that ever wore a star, I cursed myself under my breath. Yet, the way everything had worked together, many a smarter fellow than me would have been fooled.

"Seeing how you've got me fast, gentlemen, just what are you reckoning to do?" I chokes, feeling terribly sick at my stomach and awfully weak in the knees.

"Since we've given you the whole dope," Sam answers, "you can't expect us to take any chances on getting caught. So here's where Sheriff Gruber cashes in."

"Pop him off quick and let's get out of here!" Red snarls, jumping up from his chair. "We'd better find a place farther away from Highridge to wait till dark."

While I'd been expecting just this thing, yet when it came out in cold words it gave me a terrible shock. Even if I was getting old, I didn't take to the idea of passing out no more than you would.

My eyes were glued to the yawning muzzle of Sam's gun, held square and steady at my heart. In a second more she'd spit, then the jig would be up.

My mind went back to the wife waiting for me at home and our only son, a bank clerk 'way down in Chicago. It was hell to think I'd never see them again. It just didn't seem as if I could leave them like this, without a word.

"Wait a minute before you pulls the trigger!" I coaxes in a hoarse whisper. "Give me a chance to write a few words to my folks! You oughtn't refuse a fellow that!"

"Hain't got any time for such soft stuff!" Red grunts. "Have we, partner?"

Sam's eyes drifted to the floor, thoughtful like. "Don't know about that, Red. You see, I've got a woman and a couple of kids down in Arizona myself. I know how he feels. Let's give him a couple of minutes to write his good-by."

"Make it snappy, then!" Red growls. "And see that he don't work in any tips!"

Sam placed his left hand on the back of the chair while he kept the gun trained on me with his right. "Sit down, sheriff, and be mighty careful what you write. Got a pencil and paper?"

I nodded, sat down, tore a sheet out of my damp notebook, and commenced to write.

It was awfully hard to figure just what words to say at a time like that. I guess my hand must have moved terribly slow. Anyhow, Red got right uneasy and started to bawl me out.

So I finished as best I could, and asked them to leave the note there, right on the table of the cabin. I knew it would be only a matter of time when somebody would blow in and find my body and the note.

They promised they would.

Then I draws myself up from the chair, stands with my arms folded behind my back, and tries to look into the muzzle of Sam's gun, brave like. But it was the hardest job I'd ever tackled in my life.

"I feel real sorry to have to do this, sheriff!" Sam kind of apologizes, his finger taking up the play in the trigger of the gun, held dead to my heart. "But you see—business is business—we can't take any chances, you understand!"

"Give it a squeeze and he won't understand anything!" Red shouts. "I'm getting sick and tired of all this tomfoolery!"

Sam glanced at Red and nodded his head. Then his eyes turned back to me.

I met his glare the best I could. But I didn't meet it for long. Just over his left shoulder, through the open door, I caught something moving outside.

The next second, a heavy-set fellow, dressed like a scarecrow, was filling the doorway, a big forty-five in each hand.

I guess Sam must have got wise from the look on my face, for he wheeled around like a flash. Then his gun started up with a jerk.

But it didn't get up more than halfway before that fellow in the doorway lets go. And when the cabin cleared of smoke, Sam was lying in a heap on the floor, stone dead, shot clean through the head. While Red was backed against the wall, his hands high in the air, with one of the stranger's big six-shooters pressing against his stomach. Then about a dozen of the boys from town came rushing in.

It was Lanky Bill that first grabbed my

hand. And Lanky Bill was the next best trailer to Oklahoma Pete that we had in these parts.

"How did it all happen?" I gasps, tickled silly to get out of my mess.

Lanky Bill pointed to the fellow in the tattered, old clothes, holding Red to the wall with his gun.

"Ask him! He's got the whole dope. Somehow, I haven't been able to figure it all out."

The stranger must have heard us, for he turned to one of the boys and asked him to keep Red covered for awhile. Then he walks over to where we stood.

"Glad finally to meet you, sheriff!" he opens up, eying my star and sticking out his hand. "I'm Detective Keeler from Sioux Falls."

"Why—why, these devils said they bumped you off!" I gasps, wringing his hand. "How did you fool 'em?"

"I don't know exactly myself. When I hit the cold water, I must have come to long enough to wriggle out of their knots. The first thing I remember clearly, I was stretched out on a large rock on the bank, over a mile below the bridge, with two prospectors bending over me. They took me to their cabin and fitted me up with some old clothes.

"I wasn't badly hurt, and I managed to work my way into Highridge early this morning on a freight train. When I heard the story—how Red Garlow had escaped from jail after his partner had got away from the detective on the train—it didn't take me long to see through their scheme. And when I asked where that detective was now, one of the boys remarked that he'd seen him heading up the Red Swamp trail, late last night, after the rest of the posse started.

"And when I told them who I was and asked for help to track Robbins down, the boys dug up Lanky Bill. And Lanky Bill is some trailer, all right—he led us to this cabin in a jiffy."

"Mighty glad he was so speedy!" I chokes, moving over to Lanky Bill and throwing my arms around him like he was one of my own.



For Country

By CHARLES MINNIGERODE MAIGNE

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PARTS I and II

TO save her father's life, aristocratic young Patria Gonsalvo consents to leave her home in Mexico City to spy upon the American forces occupying Vera Cruz in the spring of 1914. Patria is sent under the care of Captain Simores, who poses as her servant; he is actually her most objectionable suitor. In furthering her activities Patria becomes acquainted with Lieutenant Stephen Nelson, of the American navy—who has, unbeknown to Patria, been taking care of her little brother Esteban, who was with relatives in Vera Cruz when the occupation was begun. Patria is bothered by fear of Simores, and a dawning love of Nelson.

CHAPTER XVI (*Continued*).

IN DOUBT.

"LOOK," Patria exclaimed, "how San Juan de Ulua stands out like white marble against the blue of the Gulf!" She pointed toward the break-water where the grim prison-castle squatted menacingly.

For a moment Nelson regarded her wonderingly, startled by her sudden shift of ground.

Then he feared with a lover's fear that

he had been dangerously precipitate in speaking as he had. He was glad to accept her lead; high noon to a wooer lacks the kindly propitiousness of a balmy evening and a silver moon.

"I want to see that place," he replied in steady tones. "Would you care to go over it with me some time?"

"As warm as the day is, thought of that dreadful spot makes me cold. Do you know how we regard it in Mexico?"

"Tell me."

"Mr. Nelson, we think that over the

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portal there should be a scroll crying aloud in letters of blood: 'All hope abandon ye who enter here!'"

"Tell me about it."

"There is scarcely time now; there is so much to tell. But I will go through the castle with you if you like."

She paused in some perplexity of recollection.

"Didn't I see the Mexican flag flying over Ulua yesterday?"

"Yes. But a company of marines took possession of the place in the afternoon. There are still a number of prisoners, although the Federal general released and armed most of them before he evacuated the city."

A group of officers and refugee acquaintances swooped down on Patria and Nelson.

"Come on, everybody," they demanded. "We're going to La Playa for a swim. Steve Nelson's had you to himself long enough, and it's our turn now."

An open electric tramcar quickly landed the party at the beach. As far away as the corner where they descended from the car the shouts of merrymakers already splashing in the bathing inclosure sounded clearly.

The morning sun had mounted until the beach was oppressively warm, and the water, clear and cool, extended alluring invitation.

The bathing beach, about a hundred yards in length by fifty wide, was inclosed within a palisade of bamboo and wood, through which the water might pass freely, but not the tiger sharks that prowled hungrily about the waters encompassing the place.

A broad footbridge of sufficient height to permit bathers to swim beneath it spanned the pool from the entrance to a yellow-brown pavilion on the seaward side. The pavilion was surrounded by broad verandas, and boasted a small restaurant, a bar, lounging rooms, and an air of hospitality. Inviting armchairs of hurt-proof materials offered welcome to bathers in suits wet or dry.

In accordance with the country's custom, Patria daringly appeared in a dainty striped

suit, the skirt of which reached almost up to her knees, and without stockings. A jaunty cap was pulled well down over her lustrous hair. She tentatively dabbled a white foot in the water as Nelson hurried up.

"Come on," he called. "We're the first ones ready."

He took her hand and led her into the water.

Bathing is bathing; but on so scorching a morning it was sheer bliss to bask in the cool undulations that, broken by the shark barrier, rolled in diminished force from the breakers beating against the exterior.

There was a babel of voices, calling, shouting, gurgling, from bathers as well as from those who lined the veranda and watched the natatorial performances below them.

Patria and Nelson were like two children. Cares seemed to have slipped away from the girl as she lowered her shoulders into the water after a splashing from her companion. She turned on her side and struck out. Stephen Nelson shot into a graceful water-leap and drew alongside of her.

"You swim like a mermaid," he said; "but I might have known it. Whatever you do, you do well. Isn't this great?"

"It is—glorious! Please, why does one have to have cares and wor— Heavens above! What on earth is that?"

A brittle popping that crescendoed into a droning clatter arose from the near-by beach outside the palisade. It was as if great machine guns were being operated. Patria was frightened and clutched Nelson's arm.

He reassured her. "It's only a flying boat getting ready to make an ascension. Don't think there has ever been one in Mexico before. Want to watch it?"

They hurried to the bridge, all dripping as they were, in time to see the weird-looking air monster under guidance of a naval pilot slowly gain headway, make a run down the sloping sand with increasing velocity, and take the water, the spray flying from beneath the bluff bows of the pontoons and tossed up as well by the air pressure from the whirling propeller blades.

Like a great gull, it skittered from wave to wave, then arose in a long, graceful sweep, darted over a near-by warship and, mounting aloft, swung about and headed across the city itself toward the sandhills.

The Mexicans were awe-stricken. Never before had they seen an airplane. They stood with heads thrown back, mouths agape, and eyes distended, as the machine disappeared into the blue above.

"What dreadful things!" exclaimed Patria, with a shudder; for the rise of the aircraft had wrenched her sharply back to the nature of her mission. The reconnaissance flight of the flying boat toward the distant Mexican lines seemed laden with evil portent. The joy fell from her day—such little joy as had been possible.

Unable to account for her depression, fearful that the sun had been too much for her, Nelson solicitously insisted that Patria go to the veranda shade and rest. When they had settled themselves in canvas chairs on the sea side of the sheltered porch, Patria, as though very tired, lay listlessly back—her clasped hands inert on the wet folds of her clinging skirt.

In the harbor before the pavilion gray ships hung motionless at anchor. Fussy launches darted about, motor sailers and barges, too, carrying personnel and supplies shoreward from the great fleet of towering dreadnaughts. A few fleecy clouds floated in a turquoise sky.

"What is it, dear?" Nelson begged, concerned by Patria's distraction and evident distress. "Can I do anything to help you?"

"Thank you just the same, but there is nothing you can do. I'm very much worried—about my father and mother. These frightful preparations for war depress me. I think of the danger my parents are in now and of what trouble may come to them at any time, even if they are not molested by those in authority.

"When the guns of the United States of the North begin to pound at Chapultepec and the city they will be directly under fire."

"Isn't it possible for your people to escape? You managed to get out in safety."

"No; I'm afraid not. You see—a friend

with considerable authority managed to get me out, but my father is under constant surveillance. I told you how it was."

"Miss Gonsalvo, will you let me say something to you? I don't mean to be presumptuous or intrusive. I want you to count on me to do anything in the world for you that I can.

"I fully recognize the peril of your father's position, and I'm not going to try to minimize it with maudlin sympathy. I think you must know how I really feel. If anything should happen to—him—or if you ever need a friend very badly, let me be the very first to whom you apply for aid. Do you understand?"

Patria turned a beseeching glance upon him. For an instant she read his heart, unmistakable in his eyes. Then her own eyes clouded and the lids fell. Without warning she suddenly flung up a rounded arm and buried her face in it, sobbing.

"Please, please don't do that," Nelson begged, rising anxiously and bending over her. "You are ill; the sun has been too much for you. Let me call my old friend, Dr. Cook. Patria, Patria—please! There's no use in it. You must be brave!"

"Go away!" sobbed the girl. "Oh, how I—hate—myself! You have been so fine, so considerate—just nice in every way. Go away from me! You don't know anything about me, about my difficulties. You don't know what a—wicked girl—I am! I should be—an outcast—and you—should despise—me!"

With infinite tenderness Nelson touched her shoulder.

"I know everything about you that I need to know," he assured. "I am satisfied. To me you are the most per—"

The whining voice of Captain Simores broke in.

Where he had come from, how long he had been there, what he had seen and heard, neither knew. With a start Patria straightened up, and real terror shone for an instant in her eyes.

Nelson turned inquiringly, irritated at the interruption.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

Simores spoke rapidly in patois. To

Nelson he seemed vastly excited about something; to Patria the something was known all too well.

"I have found the sewing woman you required, *señorita*. Have you any further instructions for me?"

With a queer appeal in her eyes, Patria explained to Nelson: "He is my servant—Juan."

Then she turned to Simores; she knew she must maintain her dignity before Nelson.

"Juan," she rebuked, "it is not necessary that you seek me here, or anywhere, except at the hotel. That will do. You may go now."

"*Dispensa me, señorita*—but there is something else of which I must speak—something very important—if you will give me the time. And it is for your ears alone, please."

While Nelson's Spanish was not of the purest, it was sufficient to enable him to gather the sense of the peon's remarks. Not wishing to intrude upon Patria's private affairs, he turned away, excusing himself ostensibly to purchase cigarettes at the counter.

As Patria waited for Simores to speak, she looked out on the sea, tired and hopeless. The man was wrought up, and managed to control himself only with an effort.

"It is of the airplane I wish to speak," he said at last. "I think it important to send word about it and the others that are here also. Have you any further news for me?"

"Juan, that is not all you wished to say."

She must face the situation squarely. She might as well have the matter out at once.

"I think I know what it is. Why is it that you do not trust me? Don't you understand that if I am to secure—the information we must have—that I must win—the full confidence of this man? Have I ever given you the slightest reason to doubt me?"

"Have you forgotten the express directions I received from—in the City? If I am to do my duty properly, I must do it

in my own way—and with the only weapons I possess."

Simores studied her.

The logic of her statement was unassailable. And yet—

"It is not that I doubt you," he assured her—and himself. "You mistake. It is that I am haunted by the terrible fear of—a lover. When we were on the train—I remember the implication of a promise you gave me. I regard myself therefore in the light of an accepted suitor."

"Is it to be expected that I can stand quietly by while you spend every possible moment with this—this gringo officer? He loves you! Any fool can read it in his eyes!"

"And I am deprived by fate of opportunity to defend my rights or appear before you as anything better than a menial. Why were you weeping just now?"

Patria Gonsalvo smiled quizzically at him.

"Was I weeping? I think perhaps—the sun was too warm for me—and what you mistook for tears—was only salt water from the pool. And I know that you are not a menial, but a gallant officer on hazardous service."

"And the words, Patria, that you despise yourself—should be an outcast?"

"Simores! You are too absurd! I thought you knew more about the ways of woman!"

It was startling the change that had come over Patria Gonsalvo. All trace of distress had vanished as if by magic. The drawn lines dissolved; her face broke into a wreath of quiet, daring smiles.

A thousand merry devils danced in her eyes as she coquetted guardedly with the seeming peon before her as though he were some ardent and charming princeling.

"Quick! You must go now," she said. "Take the word about the airplanes—and the arrival of the army. I have nothing more as yet."

"But I am going to dinner on one of the ships to-night, and may have important news for you to-morrow. Go quickly now, before Mr. Nelson returns. That is wonderful ground that I am working—and it may produce great riches."

"Beloved Patria!" he exclaimed.

"Rafael!" she replied. "Now go!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WALTZ-TIME.

THAT evening at one of the slippery, wave-swept steps of the Sanidad pier a launch from a warship bobbed in the wash, held in place by two sturdy sailors who clung with their boathooks to ring and coping. Commander Grandis met Patria and Nelson on the pier.

"There is a little sea running to-night, Miss Gonsalvo," was his greeting, "but I'm sure you won't mind that by the time we get through with you."

Patria indulged in a dubious smile. "I'm not much of a sailor, Mr. Grandis; you must be responsible for the consequences. Is it too dreadful a load to assume in addition to your hostship?"

"It is, unless I receive your undivided attention. You must stick very closely to me all evening if I am to be your guardian." With a laugh of acceptance Patria allowed herself to be lifted into the small boat.

Mrs. Gray, tagged as usual by the forbidding female who had attached herself to the merry widow, joined the party under escort of young Daly.

One charm of Mrs. Gray's personality was an unwavering interest in whatever person she might be with. Despite the fact that she had seen every one in the group only so recently as the luncheon hour she seemed as delighted to encounter them again as if they were long lost friends.

The Gorgon, Mrs. Hartwell—"Lugubrious Liz," as she had been christened—made a great fuss and todo about entering the boat, promptly interjecting her customary discordant note by sprightly comment upon the dangers of the deep and her reluctance to drown while still so young.

Once seated she fidgeted and fumed, coveting the places not a whit better than her own that were occupied by others aboard.

"Come sit by me, young man," she demanded of Somers who stood at the com-

panionway to give the signal to start. "You must protect me. I feel as though my dear departed Henry were standing beside me—but I must have something more substantial to cling to when this crazy cockleshell^{upsets}."

And Somers perforce had to comply, as the boat swung about and headed toward the fairway.

"That ship, the Condé, is called Noah's Ark," observed Nelson to Patria, indicating the French cruiser which they were passing.

"It looks like it," she replied, "with all those square holes in the side. I wish the animals would poke their heads out of the windows."

"Ports," Nelson corrected, with mock gravity. "When you are at sea you must conform to convention and use nautical terms. Watch carefully and you may see all sorts of animals. They keep a cow, pigs, chickens, a goat, and a donkey aboard."

"I wish they had old Madam Hartwell aboard her, too," whispered Patria mischievously. "She would add materially to the collection."

The boat careened in a wide curve and came to rest at the foot of the warship's gangway. As the party ascended to the deck the sun had fallen behind the hills, and already the eastern sky had deepened to royal blue through which gleamed a few fervid stars.

The ship's band, forward, was playing for the bluejackets. A mere wisp of smoke curled lazily from a funnel, at the other end of which boiler fires smoldered in hand, ready upon call to furnish sufficient steam to get the ship immediately under way.

Deck stanchions lay snugly lashed in place along the scuppers; hatch-hoods were stowed away and the decks were bare, for the ship was cleared for action.

One by one the great war vessels anchored in the open sea twinkled agleam, and the city water front put on its evening diadem of arc lights, a vision of rare beauty in the tropical night that soon closed down its transforming screen of alluring unreality.

The army was to take formal possession of Vera Cruz on the morrow, and the subject was the main topic of conversation. The navy, with pardonable pride felt that its work was done, and well done.

To Patria it seemed strange that the very officers who gathered with such a calm "at home" air about the dining table under their own floating roof-tree, with their comforts and luxuries close at hand, their laundry, hot baths and servants, could be the same men who a few days before had set foot upon a hostile land under the roaring of their guns, with their lives in their hands and the fire of battle in their souls.

All this seemed utterly remote. A cool air of polished social convention marked the assemblage, as though turmoil and dynamic conditions were thousands of miles away. The ship might have been anchored off the foot of Ninety-Sixth Street in the North River within hailing distance of Grant's tomb.

"Welcome to our home," whispered Nelson to Patria, sensing her trend of thought as they settled into place side by side.

"It isn't *his* home," interrupted Grandis who had overheard Nelson's murmur. "His dump is a clumsy old battleship, as ponderous as a church, while this ship is long, lithe, and speedy."

Patria, all attention, enjoyed the gay banter of the wardroom. The knowledge that at last she was in a place where the much-feared shadow of Simores's presence could not hope to penetrate buoyed up her spirits, and allowed her, for the time being at least, to throw off her sense of oppression.

While instinctively she remained alert for any tid-bit of military information, the weighing consciousness of her task at Vera Cruz was rather discarded.

Like the offering of an excellently chosen meal in some select metropolitan place of entertainment, quiet-footed mess boys deftly served course after course. Some of the viands were conventional; others pleasingly reflected the individual tang of the navy and foreign lands, picked up here and there by enterprising cooks.

The smoothness of the service suggested to Patria the thorough organization that

compelled the myriad elements of a great ship to function so perfectly.

She had been rather startled to observe at close hand through the gathering dusk the ring of dreadnaughts which embraced the seaport in a girdle of steel. She had scarcely before realized the enormous strength of the naval force that locked Vera Cruz in its grip.

On one hand, they seemed to have come, Genii of the Sea, from nowhere for a malevolent purpose; on the other, they appeared ethereal and unreal in the lovely evening haze and as though at a breath they might dissolve into dream-mist.

After dinner the party sought the deck where the air was cooler, although electric fans had hummed to and fro through the wardroom.

"Would you like to see what a home at sea looks like, Miss Gonsalvo?" asked Somers. "Let me show you my hole-in-the-wall."

Down in the Ward Room Country, as the officers' section of a warship is designated, Patria was surprised into exclamations of delight at the compactness and convenience of Somers's quarters.

There was a high, wide berth surmounting capacious drawers, an upright stationary wardrobe equipped with permanent hangers, and a desk with its individual combination-lock safe, all of steel: in time of battle wood-splinters must not fly. Household articles and framed pictures contributed to the "homey" appearance of the cabin.

"Oh," exclaimed Patria, "it's so nice I'd like to live here myself. This is superlative luxury! I'm going to pray that when I am reincarnated I may be born a naval officer. I suppose, of course, one must be born an officer—like a poet?"

"This navy life on shipboard looks very pretty and easy," replied Somers, "when you see only the social side of it during loafing hours.

"But when you take into consideration what one has to do on duty—to be out in all sorts of weather, grimy with coaling ship, greasy from tinkering with a few million dollars' worth of machinery, sweating at gunnery practice, drilling, signaling,

cleaning, painting this, that and the other thing, it's no sinecure.

"If I had to put in four years more of grind at Annapolis day and night, to receive my commission, knowing what I now know about it I would give up the ghost."

"But think of what you have learned!"

"Miss Gonsalvo, if I had worked as hard, studied as conscientiously for a post in civil life with some commercial house, I would now be drawing five or six times the salary a munificent government bestows upon one of my grade in the navy."

"Yes. But don't you take pride in serving your country?"

"We-ell—of course. But this is positively the very last country I'm ever going to serve," Somers whimsically declared.

"There really is a charm and a spell about the service. But, confidentially, it is very difficult to make bricks without straw. Our navy looks imposing, gathered here at Vera Cruz. It is amply powerful to carry out the wishes of the administration against a little country like Mexico.

"But I tell you frankly that in a sudden emergency against a great power it would be of little use as it now is. Americans are too much inclined to regard themselves in the abstract and the country in the concrete as invincible, able to rise overnight to any occasion—and we're in for a whaling big licking some day unless the country wakes up.

"We are sadly deficient in supporting and scouting ships, destroyers, supply and train ships. Why, we haven't enough men in the navy to-day to man the ships we possess; and there is no reserve available with only our ridiculous little merchant marine to draw upon in case of war!"

"I am Mexican, of course," explained Patria thoughtfully, "although my father is not a supporter of the present administration. But I do not like to think that my country is going to be bullied by yours because we are not strong enough to fight you."

"We don't want to fight anybody," interposed Daly, who had joined the party in the cabin, "but now that the army is here it looks like business all right. Washington, though, doesn't want any of Mex-

ico's property; it merely feels a sense of duty, like that of an elder brother to a younger one who is going wrong."

Patria perched on the berth, where she had been lifted by Nelson, swinging her feet. She smiled ironically.

"More elder brother!" she dryly exclaimed. "Oh, it is all a mistake, this war—any war! Let us hope for the best. It makes me heartsick every time I think of it; there has been so much fighting in the last few days. Help me to get it out of my mind," she appealed to Nelson. "Take me upstairs under the stars."

"Above, if you please," Nelson replied smilingly, attempting to distract her thoughts according to her request. "We do not have stairs on a ship."

The band had taken position on the quarter-deck when Patria and her train emerged from the companionway, and the rhythmic strains of an appealing waltz floated through the night.

In default of better partners, two young officers who instinctively craved indulgence in things terpsichorean were performing in each other's arms a howling burlesque demonstration of the latest Broadway step. They were making a great lark of it, and were obviously no mean performers.

The sight of their gyrations inspired Nelson. He had been rather quiet through dinner, with Patria so intimately near him and among his own kind. He had wanted to take her away a score of times. The music offered opportunity to get her to himself, and he asked her to dance.

In a moment they swung into the measure. She seemed to melt so perfectly into his arms—as though made for that particular pair of arms—that a longing surged over him to hold her close for fear she might escape. The fragrance of her hair, as it brushed feather-light against his cheek, breathed subtle intoxication; the rapture of her presence was almost overpowering.

Mrs. Gray, protesting that her age should protect her from such monkey-shines, was seized upon by Somers, and they too glided away. Rather to Somers's surprise, Mrs. Gray proved to be an excellent dancer.

Then Mrs. Hartwell bore down upon the group of officers.

"And who is to dance with me? I am a beautiful dancer. My Henry always said I had the most perfect foot in the world," she coyly volunteered with supermature archness.

A reluctant victim was found, one of the best dancers on the ship. Lugubrious Liz plunged into his arms. For a few distressing moments they tried to make their efforts blend. A final caracole almost precipitated them to the deck, and Liz reprovingly stopped.

"There, that's enough," she panted. "I could hardly expect you to understand my exclusive steps at once. Take me away where we can be alone and," roguishly, "you may give me a cigarette."

With a cadenced sigh the music wailed to a close. Nelson rebelliously paused, his arm about the young waist of the girl; yet he was afraid of his unruly desire to sweep her into a close embrace. He bent his head until his lips approached the little ear above which floated tendrils of hair escaped from confinement, and he whispered: "I wish that might have lasted forever."

Patria barely nodded her head. "Yes," she replied.

Then others clamored for their turn. The band racketed into a dashing syncopation, and Patria was claimed. Nelson prowled to the stern of the ship and gazed with unseeing eyes upon the sea, his mind filled with visions and hopes.

Speeding shoreward in the captain's darkened gig, as he sat beside Patria, Stephen Nelson's hand strayed to hers, touched, lingered, then hesitatingly clasped; and her hand made no effort to escape.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PATRIOT PATRIA.

OFFICIAL business took Nelson to marine headquarters next morning.

The fleet marine officer was discovered in his palatial quarters that formerly had been a civic assembly room. The huge apartment was now furnished with a Spartanlike field cot, a cracked hand mirror, an

upturned packing box upon which reposed a tin wash basin, and various articles of equipment scattered about in orderly confusion.

The major looked up through a glistening film of lather, greeted Nelson, wished him the top of the morning, invited him to breakfast, and gave his decision on the question put to him, all in one breath.

The major was a wonder. He veiled a very perfect comprehension of military matters—for he had conducted the operations of his battalion during the fight to the envious admiration of all beholders—under a screen of casualness and an engagingly jocular personality.

"Dr. Cook is gunning for you, Nelson," he grinned; "says that he won't tolerate junior interference with the medical corps for a moment."

"Doctor's a brick," replied Nelson. "I don't think he would ask for his pay for a month of Sundays if you would let him take a rifle and go out to get shot up."

His business with the major settled, Nelson crossed the street to pass the time of day with the officers of the battalion. The towering captain of a company strolled to the doorway and gave him the greeting customary between them, with due gravity and formality:

"Good morning, Sam."

"Good morning, Ed."

"Saw your brother Frank down the street."

"He's only my half-brother."

"Oh! Thought he was your full brother!"

"No."

"What business is he in?"

"Liquor business. What was he doing?"

"Well, he was full of business."

At the end of this elevating colloquy the tramp of marching men swelled in the street. The officer force from headquarters and the enlisted personnel of the battalion turned out immediately to see what was going on.

"It's the marine regiment just landed," remarked the adjutant. "My Lawd! Just look at the size of old—Harry—Day!"

A magnificent company of such numerical strength as to make the captain of

any army infantry company gnash his teeth and groan with envy marched by in column of squads, leading the regiment.

At its head toiled a short and exceedingly heavy-set captain of marines, his saber at the "carry" and his head chin up, with fiery blue eyes held resolutely to the front.

A stubby mustache encroached upon cheeks pink and fresh under the exertions of the owner and the bounding vim of life that seethed within him.

As he passed the bantering group, entirely ignoring military propriety in the bond of fellowship, his eyes cut to the side for an instant and an eyelid closed deliberately in a wink.

There was more excitement and bustle in the city than there had been for days. At last the army cooped up on the transports had been disembarked and the streets were filled with organizations heading for their new quarters.

The seaman battalions were preparing to return to the ships, for the navy men were about to surrender control of local affairs to their fellows of the army.

The uneasy Mexicans were astonished and impressed by the great automobile trucks that had been put ashore by the quartermaster corps. Heavily laden with supplies and baggage, they plied between dock and the various quarters.

The strident hallelujah of army mules resounded throughout the city as escort wagons under the guidance of profanely expert teamsters transferred the belongings of some organization to its new home.

But the moral rout of the natives was completed when the army "jackass artillery" marched to the Naval Academy and adjacent buildings where they were to be quartered. The spick-and-span mountain batteries with short, ugly guns rocking from side to side in their pack-cradles on the backs of stocky mules looked convincingly dangerous.

These mountain batteries for years had been providently designated for Mexican service by a General Staff in whose sacred files was plotted every tortuous trail across the *cordilleras*.

It was not until afternoon that the official

transfer of authority took place. To signalize the occasion there was to be a formal flag-raising ceremony. Nelson had to attend with his company, so he sent word to Patria by an orderly to be sure not to miss the sights.

Long before the appointed hour the commands and the groups of curious spectators gathered for the event.

The marines and sailors who had captured the city formed on the dusty sward beyond the circular driveway fronting the Terminal Building. Fresh uniforms for the navy men had been sent ashore from the ships, and the battalions were arrayed in their best and most dazzling white.

The consolidated ships' bands massed between the sailors and the marines. On the grass plot that centered the driveway the officer commanding the forces ashore took post with his staff.

A few paces in advance of him were the two admirals, side by side—one who had first landed to open the attack on the city, and the other his senior, who had arrived at the port in time to take command for the second day's fight had he so elected, but who instead had refrained through a fine courtesy.

A mass of spectators walled in the paraded forces—refugees, residents, foreign visitors, and Mexicans—the latter very silent, very impressed, very resentful.

A small detachment appeared on the roof of the building at the foot of a tall flagstaff. A sharp command rang out; the rifles of the assembled forces clashed to "present"; the slender swords of the officers flashed upward in salute, then down to rest, and a ball of hunting crept to the peak of the flagstaff.

A twitch at the stops broke out the colors. For the first time since the landing in force the strains of "The Star Spangled Banner" in never to be forgotten majesty amid the profound silence of those who witnessed the ceremony.

The last bars of the anthem died away. With difficulty, under the tug of high emotion—for throats were dry and eyes were dim—a husky cheer, laden with homesickness, was raised in reverent homage by the little handful of American civilians. The

radiant standard overhead, confident and dauntless, rippled with easy grace in the humid sea breeze of the tropics, and became to them a thing deified, an emblem of surpassing promise that vindicated their steadfast faith in a far homeland whose mighty protection in an hour of need would desert them not.

Fine women who had followed their men in blind loyalty and unfaltering hope, and who had lost all save honor and life in their gamble with fortune, broke down and wept silently; and their tears were not for what they had lost nor through contemplation of the dun future before them wherein life must be started afresh. It was the seeing of the flag, with consciousness of what it stood for, and which had become dearer to them so infrequent sight of it.

Patria, in a carriage on the outskirts of the crowd, was a prey to conflicting emotions.

The march of the battalions had thrilled her, for her family had known the profession of arms for centuries. Her heart had given a disquieting throb as Nelson swung past with his company.

She had never before seen him on duty with his men; for the first time she felt that he was an enemy to her homeland. She saw officers with whom she had dined and danced the night before march ignorantly by her within hand's reach, eyes to the front, stern and brief in their orders. The personal equation was lost; there remained only the sense of a mighty, impersonal and terrifying purpose of state.

With illuminating comprehension Patria suddenly came more fully to realize Mexico's need for her presence in Vera Cruz. And her eyes were drawn back to Stephen Nelson, where he stood at the head of his company.

With tormenting persistence something within her reconstructed in her consciousness the tones of his voice and revisualized distressingly the tender light for her that had come always to shine in his eyes.

With the stately solemnization of the national air of her enemies by the massed hands amid the hush of the multitude, Patria's stress of soul became oppressive; her overwrought nerves jangled harshly;

and her accusing conscience smote her. She could stand no more.

Pale and upset, she touched the *cochero's* back, gave him a hurried direction and was driven away from the scene, huddled into a corner of the vehicle in a purgatory of remorse.

At the hotel she dismissed the carriage. As she stood bemused upon the sidewalk her glance roved dully about the almost deserted street and the plaza beyond it.

Here eyes came to rest on the white walls of the great cathedral that dominated the lesser buildings in the vicinity. Almost without volition she crossed the street until the shadows of the portal confronted her. Then she passed into the church.

There was no sound in the vast interior save that of her own delicate footfalls as she stole up the center aisle. They seemed to ring in her ears and echo hollowly through the lofty spaciousness of the cathedral.

A few hazy figures that appeared but intensified shadows from the entrance resolved themselves as she advanced into bowed human forms; and she saw that women, mourning women, knelt in prayer.

Instinctively she knew they prayed for the souls of their men who had gone to death in defense of the city a few days before.

With a stifled sob Patria sank for a moment in genuflection then humbly made her way into a vacant pew, knelt, and bent her head to the rail before her.

The familiar ritual of prayers she had known since infancy seemed inadequate to fit the life-crisis that confronted her. With spontaneous words of appeal she prayed for Mexico and for strength; she invoked intercession for the man who had sent her on this, her mission.

In a surge of fear she sobbed supplication that her father might be spared, her mother, and the little Esteban, too, who seemed to have vanished from off the earth.

And all the time, try as she would to brush it aside, the image of the young American officer who had leaped into her life with such compelling fervor, an enemy to her State, insinuated itself into her thoughts, an engaging interloper, until the

walls seemed in her agony to take on the lineaments of his face in gross mockery.

A tottering old sexton shuffled by bearing in his hand a lighted taper. The lights pulsed and gleamed, and the fading of day crept almost imperceptibly into the cathedral of sorrows.

From outside, the blare of a marching band leading a regiment of the newly landed army of occupation to its quarters shattered the stillness with triumphant pæans.

An old woman arose from her knees in a neighboring pew and paused uncertainly beside Patria. She touched Patria, fearfully.

"May the Lord comfort you, my child," she whispered. "We have sacrificed together in the hour of Mexico's need and pain. We must give more yet. We can withhold nothing. We must give all!"

She turned in scorching, unreasoning anger toward the band and the troops that tramped by the open door, trembled as though with palsy, clenched her withered fists, and shook them at the sound. Her voice became a croak, dripping with hate:

"Hark to the scream of the gold-worshipping Eagle! Joy at our misery! Would that I had a thousand sons to cram the unholy sounds down your brass throat! Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" And she broke piteously down, sank feebly into the seat beside the girl.

"My sons!" she cried. "My sons! My husband!"

The searing, poignant grief of the woman and the magnetizing spiritual fabric of the hour and the place had its effect. Patria's sobs were suddenly hushed. There came into her being the fortifying substance of determination.

The image of Stephen Nelson vanished, and to her galvanized mind the church grew suddenly alight. She placed a protective arm about the wasted and poorly clad figure of the woman beside her.

"Mother," she said, "you have helped me more than you can ever know. I was wavering in a duty; I was allowing my own selfish desires to turn me aside from what I should do. Now you must let me help you."

From her purse she took a roll of bills

and pressed them into the thin hand of the old woman.

"Please take this," she asked. "I have ample for myself. You are serving Mexico to-day beyond understanding. Your blessed dead shall be comforted."

An hour later Patria went to her room and sent for her servant. When Simores arrived she smiled upon him with a new light in her eyes.

"Rafael," she emotionally announced, "you were right. I have been remiss in my duties, but I am myself again. Whatever happens to me does not matter. Hereafter, I have nothing in my heart but the will to serve Mexico.

"And though I must continue more and more to beguile what I may from the Gringo officers, you must not mind. You must help me. And when our enemies are thrown out of the country and the flag we serve flies again over Vera Cruz, if we live I will marry you!"

CHAPTER XIX.

TIPPING A MILLIONAIRE.

WITH the coming of the army to Vera Cruz the navy folded its metaphorical tents and stole away, back to the ships. The early exciting days of conquest and occupation were gone. Routine of guard and search duty was not entertaining, shore quarters were uncomfortable, so the sailormen were glad to return to their floating homes.

From all directions columns of sailors about to reëmbark concentrated upon the wide expanse of the Sanidad Pier, beside which waited scores of boats from the fleet. Navy tugs puffed and grunted from pier to vessel with decks high-piled with heavy supplies and landing guns not now required for defenses.

The marines who, save for the various ship guards, were to remain ashore with the army, were drawn up before the light tower as their departing messmates marched by in review. The rifles of the sea-soldiers rippled to salute and the passing ships' flags dipped in acknowledgment of the honor.

So the navy officially withdrew from the port, in the consciousness of having well performed a difficult and unaccustomed task, leaving administration of affairs to their fellows of the kindred service.

Steve Nelson had caught the eye of the army chief of staff. That young officer had felt most dismal at the prospect of again having to be cooped up far out in the roadstead with the fleet at anchor, and with only infrequent opportunities to see Patria.

His spirits took a limitless bound when he had halted his company on the pier, for there awaited him an official order to report to General Fenton as *liaison* naval aid attached to the staff of the commanding general.

With boyish glee he snatched his belongings from a tug as it was about to steam away to his ship, turned his company over to a junior officer, and scurried away to the Terminal Building where he was to share a room with Sanger, one of the army aids.

There was a last, lingering party—a *despedida*—that evening under the Portales, for some of the navy men were not to re-embark until the morrow. Two weanling ensigns whose places ashore were soon to be occupied by trim youngsters in army khaki, exercised their social accomplishments and linguistic attainments upon Patria.

For the twentieth time young Rogers, in the ebullience of his youth, recounted his part in the capture of the city and made material addition to the estimate of fearful execution achieved by his machine guns during the fight.

Nakes, his no-striper companion, contented himself with a reserved indorsement, he being precociously engaged in trotting out his very best French for Patria's benefit, informing her with sirupy unction in the language of diplomacy of his undying regard.

Patria spoke French and English as well as she spoke her native tongue. Gifted with a keen sense of humor, she preserved a perfectly decorous face and allowed Nakes to rave on.

It was late when Nelson reached the Portales, and the gay party was breaking

up. All day, since his designation as aid, he had been familiarizing himself with the details of his new duties.

Knowledge that he was to remain ashore wreathed his face in smiles, and the cup of his contentment brimmed copiously over at sight of Patria and the impending disintegration of the gathering which would leave her to himself.

For an instant something inimical, self-hardening, flashed into Patria's eyes as Nelson's voice in cheery greeting to the company fell upon her ears; for the commitment of her recent resolve under stress of emotion was rooted in her consciousness.

Yet there was an intrusive fly in the ointment of her predetermination. Somehow, the mellow evening and pleasant surroundings seemed utterly out of key with the profoundly soul-stirring theatric stage-setting of the dim cathedral in which, with a tinge of hysteria, she had been so carried away.

She was haunted by a growing conviction that she had been childishly playing to her own grand stand; and the thought of her contingent promise to marry Simores chilled her with dismay.

But she must go on; act her part, in spite of everything. And no one must suspect her of acting. With forced, smiling gayety she turned to Nelson, gently railing.

"The conquering hero comes!" she hailed. "I saw you tramp past with your company this afternoon, Mr. Nelson, a martial and inspiring figure. I was terribly impressed—and quite frightened!"

"Did you hear his parade-ground voice?" inquired an officer. "When he was a midshipman captain at Annapolis every time he gave a command the spray used to dash over the Santee."

"Indeed I did," replied the girl. "Mr. Nelson, do you always look so severe to those under your control?"

"One isn't allowed to look severe these days; the 'boss' won't permit it," grinned Nelson. "Under present conditions when an officer gives an order he says 'please' or 'if you don't mind,' and at night we tuck the bluejackets into their hammocks and bring 'em glasses of grape-juice."

When the others had reluctantly taken

their departure, Nelson dropped into a chair with a broad sigh of satisfaction and leaned toward Patria, across from him.

"It's good to be here—again. You look to-night as though you had just dropped down from the skies. I'm sure there must be a constellation missing up above!"

The sleepy fragrance of the darkened plaza hung heavy in the night, its aromatic perfume wafted to the tables on the faint warm breeze that harped a madrigal rustle among the palm-fronds across the way. In the emptiness of a near-by side street some forlorn mongrel amorously bayed the late moon up to its post above the sea.

With quiet tread, bayoneted rifles silver-touched by the shield of night, an army patrol passed on its watchful round. And with startling aptness the small but admirable orchestra which played for the diners with all the lyric warmth and feeling of the Mexican tropics swung into the strains of "Lovely Night, Oh, Night of Love."

Man and girl were hushed, in common durance to the Barcarolle's appeal. Then, with a great happiness, Nelson told Patria of the good fortune which was to keep him ashore.

And the girl was sorely troubled.

She had seemed to see—to sense, rather—a way out of danger both for herself and for Stephen Nelson; if he were safely aboard his ship there would be an end to their constant intimacy. She should be able to secure her needed information elsewhere.

And it struck her like a blow to realize that now, in his position as aid, Nelson must have full knowledge of every plan in contemplation by the American headquarters; and that her duty to her state unqualifiedly demanded, now more than ever before, that she exert every art at her command to bind this man to her chariot wheel.

"Is anything the matter—dear?" Nelson was disturbed; it was not like Patria to be so silent. With an effort she came out of her mood.

"Matter? Oh, no. For a moment I was a trifle *triste*.. We Latins use that word to describe our feelings when we don't really

know just what they are. Perhaps I am a little tired."

Nelson was promptly concerned:

"Then you had better get some rest. I'll sacrifice myself, as much as I hate to. But to-morrow I will be free all afternoon unless something unforeseen occurs. What would you like to do? For I want to be with you."

"Would you like to go over to the castle—to San Juan de Ulua? You said something about it, you know."

"Just the thing," he agreed. "I will get a boat and we can go right after luncheon."

"You are a disturbing young man. I should be getting my beauty sleep about then."

"Beauty sleep? Heaven forbid! If you acquire any more beauty than you have you'll put this town on its ear. As it is," he wryly added, "you seem to have been raising the deuce with those navy youngsters who just left." In his voice there was a hint of something that might have been jealousy; and it was not lost on Patria.

"My dear man," she assured him, "I like men—not children such as they are. They are very amusing and very harmless—but they do take up one's time."

And Steve Nelson with a lover's contentment took to himself the implication of the unfinished sentence.

A muted violin breathed almost at their shoulders. Maestro Alvarez, the orchestra leader, had strayed to their table. With swarthy cheek caressing the sounding board of his mellow instrument, his eyes dreaming into the nowhere between Patria and her wooer, he played to them alone.

His bow seemed to lift bodily from the strings and fling at his auditors appealing, exquisite strains, now rich and full, now diminished to a tenuous thread of sweetness and entreaty—a dulcet fabric of melody woven of moonbeams and the ageless story of man and maid.

Moore's enduring lines—needing no word to voice their utterance—throbbed into the night: "Believe Me if All Those Endearing Young Charms," the ancient theme of love that has been told since time was not, and in every corner of the earth.

Nelson's inmost being seemed to flow to her who sat across from him, so quiet and so lovely. He looked upon her with a great yearning, and knew that he must have her, to guard, to cherish, to love.

Power possessed him; he felt that it was impossible for her not to understand and respond to the enthroning prayer he poured from the depths of his heart. She was surpassingly wonderful, glorified—too sacred to touch. His daring to worship her in all her beauty of mind and body seemed profanation.

And Patria felt it all.

As the pleading violin wailed its message, and Stephen's, she forgot the call of her country, the peril of her father, and that she was within the enemy's lines on a business that awarded for discovery the penalty of shameful death. She became all woman and only Nelson mattered, after all.

As though forced by a power greater than her will, she languorously turned until her dark eyes looked straight into his. Even after the last notes of the violin had died away in lingering beauty, they held each other's gaze as though in an embrace.

Harsh and grating, a challenge rang in the stillness:

"Halt! Who's there?"

Like the bursting of a bubble the Garden of Dreams vanished; the spell was broken. Nelson sprang to his feet, guardingly in front of Patria. There was a brief scuffle and commotion at the edge of the plaza.

"Come out of there, hombre," a steely voice demanded.

In a moment two members of the infantry patrol jerked a ragged object across the street and hauled it before Nelson in the light of the Portales.

"This Spig was dodgin' around them palm-trees, watchin' you, lootnant!" one of the soldiers reported.

It was Rafael Simores. And Patria's heart almost stopped beating.

Simores stood sullenly between his captors, his eyes fixed balefully upon the girl and the officer. He would not deign to speak. Jealousy raged within him and he deliberately was placing upon Patria the onus of explanation.

In the rude shock that tumbled her hap-

py dream-castles into pitiful ruin at her feet, Patria so hated Simores that her hatred was venomous in its intensity. He had been spying upon her! And she had bargained, pledged her word and herself. The girl shivered as though the night were arctic.

The brief tension was abruptly broken by one of the sentries. With a yank upon Simores's collar and a crisp "Come on with me, Spig," he started toward the *carcel*.

In spite of her mood it brought Patria back to her duty. Without Simores she would be without a messenger; and she owed him a certain loyalty.

"He is my servant, Juan," she explained, appealing to Nelson. "He was probably only waiting to see if I wanted anything more this evening."

"Oh, I see." Nelson looked with more friendly eye upon the wretched peon.

"A faithful old family retainer, eh?"

"Yes—yes, of course," assented Patria hurriedly. "He is very—faithful."

Nelson briefly commended the men for their vigilance and explained to them that the fellow had only been trying to serve his mistress, and that he probably failed to understand the restrictions as to natives appearing on the street after hours. He directed them to release him and told Simores to get on homeward.

The sentry hesitated. He eyed Nelson with the respect due to an officer, but seemed to have something on his mind. At last he blurted out:

"Beg pardon, sir, but—the army's in charge of the city now. This man would be picked up by patrols twenty times between here and where he lives. He ain't got a Chinaman's chance to get by!"

Nelson saw the point at once, and nodded agreement with the opinion. He asked Simores where he lived. Sullenly the presumed peon told him. Nelson thought for a moment.

"I'm going down that way myself in a few minutes. You can come with me," he said. He turned to the sentries. "It's all right," he added, "I am the naval aid attached to General Fenton's staff. Let him go and I will take charge of him."

When the patrol had gone, a faintness came over the girl at thought of Nelson and Simores being together, alone in the blackness of the streets. Simores, she felt, would cheerfully slip a knife into Nelson's back if he got the ghost of a chance; and she could not warn Nelson without letting a very malignant cat out of its bag.

She looked pale and drawn. With concern, Nelson became aware of her faintness and, attributing it to weariness, insisted upon taking her home. Curtly motioning Simores to follow, Nelson led Patria to the hotel and into the lobby.

The peon stood just inside the door with his eyes fixed steadily upon Patria and the officer. Patria, in haste to reach the seclusion of her room, was halfway up the steps when Nelson ran up and stopped her.

"You had better make that servant of yours understand that he'll have to obey orders about keeping off the streets at night, otherwise he'll get into a peck of trouble. And I don't want any trouble ever to come to you or anything that is yours."

It was too much for Patria; her sense of humor would not down. In spite of her distress a conviction as to Nelson's ability to take care of himself relieved her with a warm glow of satisfaction. There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes as she demurely replied:

"I'll have to tell Sim—Juan—that he had much better not take any liberties with—the United States Navy! Thank you. Good night."

Nelson bent low over her hand and kissed it. Over his head Patria stole a glance at Simores; the peon was rigid.

The girl lingered on the staircase as Nelson rejoined Simores. She could not tear herself away, and a measure of her fear returned. But she sighed with relief as she heard Nelson's crisp order:

"Push on, *hombre*—lead the way," and he added an authoritative shove to point his order. Simores, almost bursting with resentment, stumbled out of the door as Nelson waved an airy farewell to Patria and followed him coolly into the night.

Once, on the way, Simores stopped as though to adjust a loosened thong of his sandal. If he could get near enough to

Nelson for a sudden spring, the flash of a knife might take the officer unawares.

But Nelson stopped, too, and chose the moment to light a cigarette; he even held the match so that the peon could see what he was trying to fix. Simores had to go on.

Before a disreputable-looking house they came to a halt as the man signified that it was where he lived. A near-by arc light threw a faint illumination upon the place.

Nelson's thoughts, filled with the image of Patria, suddenly became conscious of her servant's appearance. The man's shirt was badly torn by the man-handling of the sentries. Nelson reached into his pocket.

"Son," he observed pleasantly in his best Spanish, "I don't know whether you appreciate it or not, but in your country you have the most wonderful women in the world. Here—take this!" Nelson quickly pressed two dollars into the hand of one of the wealthiest men in all Mexico.

"Take his," he said, "and get yourself a new shirt; those sentries were just a little bit rough. Good night."

As Nelson's white-clad form jauntily turned the corner there arose on the outraged night a blistering torrent of ravings and cursings. Two silver dollars whanged against the opposite wall.

Simores wildly shook his fist after the now departed American, called upon Heaven to witness his promise of vengeance, tore at his hair, with tears of rage streaming down his face, and plunged into the house like a madman.

CHAPTER XX.

A HORROR FORTRESS.

SIMPLY gowned in white, a limp organdie hat becomingly shading her face, and a flimsy parasol in hand, the following afternoon Patria accompanied Nelson to the long pier. A pack of clamoring native boatmen yelped for patronage, and Nelson selected the most seaworthy and cleanest-appearing boat for their journey across the harbor to San Juan de Ulua.

The water behind the breakwater was a

placid mirror surface as the bargeman's oar-strokes propelled them toward the castle. The Carlos Quinto, a small Spanish cruiser that unforgivingly had taken position near the fortress, lay near the two American cruisers whose guns had dominated Ulua during the fight.

What had seemed fair and low across the harbor became grim and towering as the walls of the massive fortification were neared. The small boat wormed in and out of the shipping, and nosed into the cooling shadow of the great sea-wall.

Antiquated big guns peered over the parapet; an enormous rusty chain drooped from the wall and disappeared into the sea. In a corner, on an esplanade outside the wall, a corrugated iron shed half concealed a torpedo tube from which Mexican defenders had been warned to stay away under penalty of being blown off the reef.

To westward of the castle the boat entered the open moat. Square embrasures, yawning high above the surface of the water, pierced the wall and with a touch of modern utility were barred by crossed lengths of trackrails.

The water in the moat was pellucidly green, like the deadly arsenic streams of the far west. Through it the foul bottom gleamed with repugnant suggestion of mystery and corpses.

American marines stood guard at the sallyport. Dangling at the belt of the corporal of the guard was an enormous metal ring from which swung gigantic keys that surely must have known medieval days.

Patria and Nelson roamed wonderingly about the terreplein, the courtyard of the fortress. It was topped by great flagstones. Feeble wisps of grass between the joints strove pathetically to keep alive, as though nature herself were in protest against the terrors for which the place was infamous.

With matter-of-fact air that bespoke the soldier long accustomed to soul-hardening things, the corporal escorted them to the main prison entrance. It lay so deeply under an archway that no ray of sun could penetrate its maw from any angle. A stout iron gate barred further progress, and the ancient lock moaned resentfully under torque of the great key.

Within the prison proper the gloom seemed impenetrable. A second grille a few feet beyond the gate interposed its barrier. Clinging to the bars with strangely white hands a dozen humans could be dimly discerned, their eyes sunken, their cheeks as well. Hair, beard, and clothing bore witness to utterly unkempt misery.

A clammy and moldy odor hung heavily about this cavern of darkness. A leering, subservient "trusty" hustled the prisoners away from the grating as the visitors entered the great cell where the moldiness increased in offensiveness until it became a stench.

Gray shadows slunk near the walls; others huddled in corners in fetid apathy—and as eyes adjusted themselves to the gloom it became apparent that the shadows were men. A Mexican keeper, uncouth and inhuman in appearance, cracked a blacksnake whip and the shadows stirred sluggishly until they formed a rough line.

The political prisoners of the Mexican government stood before the visitors, an appalling exhibit.

Nelson was indignantly aroused by the misery and squalor of what he saw. A doddering old fellow smirked inanely at him.

"Why are you here?" Nelson asked him.

With a wealth of gesture and sibilant, liquid speech, the man poured forth a volume of Spanish too rapid for Nelson to understand. Patria, who had sufficiently conquered her repugnance to follow into the cell room, translated:

"He says he does not know why he is here—that he has been in this cell for twenty years—that he is innocent of any crime. And he wishes to know when Porfirio Diaz is going to let him out."

The trusty glided up:

"Don't believe him, *señorita*," he whined, "he is a murderer and a thief and has been here only three years. He is just trying to excite your sympathy, for he knows perfectly well that Señor Madero is president; he put him here."

Nelson turned half accusingly to Patria. Through her, in a way, he seemed to arraign her government and her people. Resentment stirred within him.

"Miss Gonsalvo," he stated, "you wondered why my country interfered with yours. There stands one reason. The conditions in this prison symbolize and denounce a system of government that the nations of the civilized world cannot condone or tolerate.

"They belong, these methods, in the Dark Ages. With all due respect to you, these things are impossible! Justice is a mockery here, and freedom an unheard-of thing!"

Patria had never dreamed that Nelson could be aroused like this; the sincerity of his indignation could not be doubted. And she, in all her sheltered life, had never remotely visualized the actual horrors that brought so vividly to understanding the foundation of truth about Ulua's frightfulness, and its dungeons, that had been part and parcel of the traditions of her upbringing.

She was conscience-stricken, shamed for herself and for her country. With illuminating understanding she came to know that her father, with his broad humanity, was in disgrace because he revolted against a condition of state that countenanced—nay, practiced—a barbarous despotism such as this. Humble and unnerved, she asked tremendously:

"Oh, Mr. Nelson! What can I do?"

"Will you tell these men something for me?" Nelson begged.

"Tell them that the United States of the North holds Vera Cruz, and that within two or three days at the most they will be put into better quarters until their cases can be investigated. Any that are innocent or have served their time will be released.

"This filth will be cleaned up at once. I will bring this matter to the attention of General Fenton. These people may as well understand that we don't do things this way!"

And Patria, profoundly moved, willingly complied.

They saw other cells, cells of torture so short and narrow and shallow that a man could neither stand upright within them nor stretch out to full length. One confined in these cells was condemned to stoop as

long as he remained there. Gyved chains were fast to the walls; but happily the cells were vacant.

A story was current in Vera Cruz that an underground passage from the castle communicated with the city, and that sinister unknown cells lay deep under the sea-scoured battlements.

Nelson asked the corporal about them, but he knew nothing of their location, although he had heard the story and had seen a narrow passageway that led to some uninvestigated spot. He showed them the entrance. With a dim lantern they undertook its exploration.

The way descended abruptly over a footing of slimy mud that sucked at their feet with sickening clutch. In the feeble rays of the lantern, fat rats lumbered out of the way, slinking into crevices at the foot of the dripping walls. The passageway thickened with gloom and oppression, and the noisome stench became almost unbearable.

Protecting their breathing with handkerchiefs, the corporal and Nelson pushed ahead—for Patria had remained outside—until they were halted by a blind wall. The lantern, held close to it, disclosed solid blocks of masonry pointed with mortar unmistakably but a few days old. So the secret of the castle had been securely buried.

Once more in the blazing sunshine, the contrast was painful. Nelson felt as though he had been through an inferno. He drew into his lungs great gasps of the pure air.

But already the guardians of the castle were taking prophylactic measures. A gasoline pump had been installed and half a dozen prisoners under guard were directing a slashing stream of sea-water from the nozzle into the various cells.

They washed up unwholesome surges of litter and filth, and the heavy hydraulic attack beat upon foul walls from under the crumbling dirt of which materialized scrawled pictures and queer Spanish and Indian names, in mute witness to men who had once inhabited the cells in some forgotten time.

A crude presentation of the Virgin with her Infant in her arms, beneath which was

scratched a prayer for release of any kind, faced a gaudily ambitious depiction of the daughter of Moctezuma in the flaunting glory of her feather headdress. Names were chiseled into the stone or rubbed on with charred sticks; and unbelievably ancient dates accompanied them.

Proving that already authority had felt as they did, Patria and Nelson saw the prisoners marched from their cells. They stood, a desperately pitiful array of humanity, violently blinking in the unaccustomed sunlight.

The main cell-room was lighted only by a single narrow and barred aperture high in the vaulted ceiling of the prison. The clothing of the men was in rags and tatters, and stank to high Heaven; their physiques were wrecked and bent.

Even the stolid marines who had been on guard in the castle, and who had somewhat accustomed themselves to the horror of the place, were moved to wrath. They earnestly cursed a government that would permit such conditions.

Then Patria in low tones told Nelson what she knew of the castle and its legends. The mere name of the place was a word of terror throughout Mexico. Prisoners, political and otherwise, had been seized and spirited away from their homes—and were never heard of again. But every one knew they had been taken to San Juan de Ulua.

There were hair-raising tales that at night writhing, screaming bundles enveloped in sacking had been plunged from an embrasure into the sea where hungry sharks cruised in anticipation of feast, having often before found food at the spot. There had been tortures unmentionable.

The most merciful release of all had come to victims in front of a bullet-pocked side wall where the blasts of countless firing squads had chiseled an irregular and gruesome epitaph about the height of a man's heart.

The old nurse who had cared for Patria all her life had whispered these stories to frighten her into obedience. Patria had listened with shudders; but she had never believed them quite until now.

With questioning, thoughtful eye she looked at the Stars and Stripes that flut-

tered in the light breeze at the flagstaff peak where hitherto only the red, white, and green of Mexico had been flown. Then she closed her eyes, and answered in monosyllables when Nelson spoke to her.

It seemed to her that no one else could have such involved problems as beset her; that there was a great right somewhere that just missed of solution; and that the world was a hollow mockery and upside down.

As they took boat again for the return to Vera Cruz, and glided by the western scarp of the fortress along the moat, in which swam sluggish, unwholesome-looking fish, the sun was sinking. Its rays turned the weathered battlements, moss-decked and solid, to a delicate shade of rose.

A tiny black kitten emerged from an embrasure—the one through which the screaming, struggling sacks were reputed to leap—and the little thing stretched itself, sparred for a playful moment at a dangling lichen, then peacefully curled up for a nap in the benign warmth of the dropping blood-red sun.

CHAPTER XXI.

DEADLY DOUBLE-DEALING.

DURING the days that Patria apparently lived the life of one only anxiously awaiting in safety news of her people in the interior, Simores had been free to roam the city and pick up what information he could from the Mexican associates among whom he was necessarily thrown.

Bearing in mind Patria's request to be on the lookout for news of Esteban, he had made occasion to institute guarded inquiries whenever possible.

Since he had seen the house on the Plaza Porfirio Diaz from the front only, and had believed it vacant, he had met in the course of his wanderings a peon who claimed to have seen a boy of about the age of Esteban fleeing toward the water-works at Tejaría while the troops were in retreat.

Desirous of winning Patria's gratitude, Simores had gone there in quest of the boy.

But all the natives in the vicinity disclaimed having seen any one answering the description.

This failure resulted in Simores again examining the house on the plaza. And this time he walked all around it and discovered the great shell hole. He went into the house. There the devastation proved to him that tragedy had occurred.

Inquiry in the neighborhood uncovered an old crone who, watching in fear and trembling through a crack in a shutter of her home, had seen bodies removed from the house.

She had recognized the aunt, Señora Lorenzana, who, though of a much higher social station, she knew by sight, and the old servant with whom she had often gossiped and hobnobbed. They were dead; but she had seen no boy. Possibly they had taken him out before she peeped through the shutter.

Simores resolved to keep this to himself for the time being. He was unwilling to bear such news to Patria until further search had proved fruitless. He therefore lost no time in calling at the various hospitals.

Although several boys had been treated for unavoidable injuries received during the fight for the city, Esteban was not among these, and Simores had been in a quandary as to just what course to pursue. He felt it would be a most propitious feather in his cap if he could find Patria's brother for her.

And now he resolved, if possible, to make capital for himself out of the situation. He had brooded all day. Nelson's gratuity of the two dollars had capped the climax of his insane jealousy and hatred of the American officer.

His resentment turned bitterly toward Patria, too, for from his concealment the night before he had witnessed the full incident of the maestro's magic violin, and he had interpreted accurately her mood and impulse toward Nelson.

So he was in an ugly and dangerous frame of mind when he went to Patria's room that night for his instructions. He wanted to hurt her. He was cunning enough to wish to raise in her false hopes the better

to dash them down and cause her suffering when the time came for full disclosures.

Yet there clashed with his evil intent the remote possibility that in some way he might win the girl to a softening attitude toward him.

He tried, then, with an assumption of sympathy and loyal servitude to appear big in her eyes; he never even mentioned the incident of the previous night with Nelson.

In manner tenderly regretful he therefore told Patria of his search for Esteban and the clues he had unearthed and run down without result—except the news of the wrecked house and the death of her aunt and her servant.

The family, he said, according to information secured in the neighborhood, had escaped from the city at the time of the attack, but he could find no trace of them. Her people might be sheltered in some little town, unable to reach Mexico City, although there was no telling what dangers they may have encountered.

Even such slender and dubious news was precious to Patria, for by now she had almost given up hope of finding the boy. She took fresh heart and charged Simores not to relax his quest.

The man assured her of his intention to continue the search. He sank back in his chair and regarded her speculatively.

Patria became uneasy under his scrutiny as he lolled familiarly in her room, the only place where she could receive him and exchange information with any degree of security. An easy air of possession marked his manner toward her.

He had previously been wise enough by instinct not to obtrude upon her any reminder of the promise she had made him; he felt that the ground was insecure under his feet.

Yet to save his soul he could not repress a gleam of anticipation as he appraisingly watched her, reveling to himself in the belief that his plans and desires were on the road to fulfillment. Patria's flesh seemed to crawl.

Carefully casual, Simores lighted a cigarette and ventured the attempt to establish with some degree of recognition the

new relationship that verbally existed between them:

"Tell me, Patria dear, do you wish to live in Mexico when things are settled—and our task is completed? It occurs to me that your beauty and talents require the appreciation of the Continent, of Europe, to give them a proper field."

Patria was in no mood for air castles, even make-believe ones in the pursuit of a hateful duty. She answered sharply:

"I think Mexico requires the residence and helpfulness of all its citizens, now and later. It will need every one, in the country and out, to help rebuild this messed-up scheme of affairs and establish life as it should be."

"You and I, beloved," breathed the man eagerly, "need not worry ourselves about such things. We can forget politics. Our wealth will let us indulge our fancy, whatever it may be."

"Let us not deceive ourselves; we are the ones that count. What is Mexico to us? I have only your pleasure at heart. I will lay the world at your feet when we are married!"

He waxed to apostrophe: "Oh, speed the day!"

Patria looked resentfully at him. "Mexico is not yet freed, Captain Simores," she asserted defensively. "Bear in mind that any promise of mine is contingent upon that. Please don't forget it."

He arose from his chair, fired by desire. "Not 'Captain Simores,'" he said. "Rafael—your own Rafael! Your slave! We will conquer all obstacles in the end. My fervor must convince you, win you—even before that glorious day."

Rafael seemed a trifle inconsistent in his regard for his country. But so far as his inflamed regard for the girl could go, he was daft about her; he truly loved her, but with passion, too, burning infatuation and thwarted desire, and a grievously wounded pride.

He was nervously impatient for the little liberties as well as for the license that would be his as soon as they were married. Fired by these complexities, he crossed the space that separated them, his arms extended in tremulous appeal.

"Ah, Patria," he declaimed, "I have starved for you! You beat into my heart and mind day and night! I clasp your image to my breast while the fires of love consume me! I am an accepted lover, yet I have none of the privileges."

Patria recoiled before him.

"Stop!" she cried. "No, no! Don't come a step nearer. I have made my bargain, but until it is completed you have no right—"

He interrupted wildly:

"It is not right I demand. I beg, I implore! Just one kiss from those tormenting lips to keep me sane—a treasure to hold in memory while I must wait! Heart of my heart, do not deny me! Have pity, have mercy!"

Patria was despairingly frightened. Simores's ardor and passion were too plainly exhibited. He was almost beyond reason.

And her repugnance overpowered her. She could not help but display her profound loathing of the man's nature and personality.

"I could not bear for you to touch me," she said almost hoarsely. "You must leave me in peace. And shame upon you to ask it while you know the state of my mind, my worry, the responsibilities I am living under."

The sinister power of the man came into her mind. In her distress she turned to desperately hopeful appeal.

"Please go now," she begged. "I am not myself. Oh, can't you understand a woman? I am not ungrateful; but now I have no room in my thoughts except for my people—and the state—and the state. I don't know what I am saying! Give me time."

"I see." Simores's voice slashed with deadly drawl. "I think I understand, and I am not to be made a fool of. You have proved yourself to be an accomplished actress; you have even been acting for me."

"If you were sincere in agreeing to consider me as your future husband, you would not object to my caresses. Now I will tell you what I think."

"I believe you are preparing to betray Mexico—you who come from a family of

stainless honor. You ask for time—time for what? Again you were with that gringo officer all day, while I, your accepted suitor, must slink like a dog and feed only on such crumbs of favor as you cannot help but fling to me.”

Patria put out a hand in protest; her eyes closed as in pain.

With harsh incisiveness Simores continued:

“I *will* give you time. I will give you two days. You may betray me, but I shall write out this conversation so that a friend may make it known if you do.

“If in two days you do not bring me definite information as to the time of the gringo advance, and if you do not then swear on your rosary to marry me as soon as we can escape, not only will I tell of your perfidy to the Mexican authorities, but I will see that the gringos know you for what you are—that your blind pig of a naval officer knows.

“And I will make sure that your parents pay the penalty.”

And love-mad Simores turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

RANKLING REVENGE.

THE two days passed for Patria in a chill of apprehension.

If Simores carried out his threat, as he easily could, there would be an end to any possibility of her further usefulness in Vera Cruz.

She knew the way affairs were conducted by the Mexican administration if its objectives were jeopardized in any manner. Her father's life, she was convinced, would be forfeited should she be reported as unfaithful to her trust.

And the second requirement imposed upon her by Simores's demand called for her personal surrender to him. His callous intent to utilize any factor to gain his ends was now plain.

But even to save her father's life—and she knew he would be the first to forbid the sacrifice—she could not consider purchasing from Simores at his sickening price

agreement not to bear false witness against her.

And Nelson!

The thought of his shock and forever shattered faith when her status and activities should be disclosed put her in a panic of desperation. Almost hysterically she attempted to brush the phantom aside. The relentless hand of circumstance closed down upon her with deadly grasp.

The refuge of suicide at once suggested itself. But for the present she put it off, though she drew a pitiful comfort, so strained had her nerves and senses become, to reflect with morbid triumph that she would always have that recourse as a last resort.

But that end seemed inevitable. She came to regard herself as one doomed, and went about the casual business of the day with an inward and outward false calmness that was ghastly in its portent.

During the two days Simores did not approach Patria; but she caught frequent glimpses of him as he loitered about the hotel and plaza.

And just as instinctively she avoided Nelson, for she feared to betray herself to him by her constraint and manner. She was apprehensive as well of exciting Simores to some overt act of rage should he see them together.

The afternoon of Patria's last day of grace came, and Nelson called for her at the hotel. She sent down word that she was indisposed, with a sick headache, and begged to be excused.

Nelson, much upset by the report, cast about for some way in which visibly to show his sympathy. He wrote her a brief note, which the hotel people sent up to her.

Then he recalled a florist's small nursery a short distance from the Plaza Porfirio Diaz, and set out for it afoot, intending to purchase what flowers he could find for the girl.

Simores, still curious about the disappearance of Esteban, had taken to frequenting the neighborhood of the wrecked house on the plaza. That afternoon he sat on the step of a squalid shop listening to the owner, who was telling about the fight.

Nelson walked by on the far side of the street. The shop owner saw him, and ceased his chatter. He grasped Simores by the arm and pointed to the officer.

"There," he whispered sharply, "that is the officer who commanded the gringos fighting on this street. He had a cannon at the next corner. I saw it all from the rooftop where I was hiding. Shells were fired into that big house opposite the plaza. See—you can observe the great hole in the wall!"

"What!" exclaimed Simores. "That man?"

He concealed his face behind his companion's shoulder so that Nelson might not recognize him.

His heart began to thump with triumphant hope.

"Did you see a boy there in that house?" he demanded.

"*Un muchacho? Sí, sí, señor!* That officer went into the house after his cannon

had wrecked it, and he came out with a boy in his arms, laughing like the swine the gringos are. The boy was dead. I myself saw him placed on a stretcher that he might be carried away and burned."

"Did you see the boy taken away?"

"Well, no, *señor*. The gringos began shooting right and left at the moment in the next street. I am a poor man, *señor*, and I fled for my life."

"Are you sure the boy was dead?"

"Of a certainty! He was white as marble except where he was covered with *sangre*, red and smeared."

Simores arose abruptly and hastened away. He saw at last a lever with which he should be able to move Patria profoundly, and at the same time wreak personal vengeance upon Nelson for daring to be attracted to the girl.

He upbraided himself for not having thought of the expedient before. The ethics of the matter disturbed him not at all.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



AFTER A CRUISE

MY system being what it is
 And billows what they are,
 I never would be worth my salt
 (*I know it!*) as a tar.
 Try as I may to be discreet
 I can't keep either head or feet;
 And circumspect as I may be
 The bow is always stern to me:
 You see! I'm all at sea at sea!

If there are sails their pale expanse
 Fill me with crushing awe;
 I marvel at the soaring masts,
 A funnel's reeking maw.
 Thus dazed, no doubt, are alien eyes
 By these grim towers that arise
 Amid the city's rush and roar.
 Ah, *now* I know, if not before,
 Why tars are all at sea ashore!

Edward W. Barnard.



Sometimes Pretending's Risky

By HOWARD ROCKEY

DICK BOLTON'S salary as a clerk was twenty-five dollars a week. He let it be generally understood that he was making fifty.

"A mere pittance," Dick would explain to the others at the boarding house when he stayed in of an evening. "I'll be a partner one of these days—or open a shop of my own. You see, I'm valuable to the boss because of my acquaintance."

Some of the boarders swallowed that. Others smilingly took it with a grain of salt. In either event, his boasting flattered Bolton's vanity.

He was a natural poser as well as a most impractical and romantic dreamer. If Dick's boss had happened to hear him, he would have snorted with contempt.

"If there ever was a loafer who likes to gape at the looking-glass and pretend

he's what he's not, it's that young jackanapes! The trouble with the young fool is that he's too good-looking."

In that, old Simon Bloom was right. Dick looked like a polo player or a boon companion of the Prince of Wales. He brushed his blond hair sharply back from his well-formed forehead. His shoulders were broad and he was built like a British guardsman.

Many of Bloom's customers remarked on his appearance. They were the smartest and wealthiest people in New York. Young Bolton memorized their names and expressed his contempt of them—from a strictly scenic standpoint.

"Take Anson Van Groot, for instance," Dick remarked to Anna Morton, as they walked in the park one evening. "More money than he can ever spend, and blood

that's as blue as indigo, but he looks like a butcher's son!"

"Better be rich than handsome—unless you can be both!" Anna loved to tease him. "Just the same," she pressed his arm with tender apology, "I'm glad you're not fat and ugly."

Anna was more than fond of Dick; but at times she grew impatient. She had come to New York from an up-State town, with the hope that her meager talent might lead to a musical career. It didn't, and Anna had sense enough to know she was a failure—as far as earning her living from the piano was concerned.

But she had not been discouraged. She was far too game for that.

Having no idea of business, and no talent for the needle, she invested her slender savings in a course at a beauty school. Not that she needed such knowledge for her personal adornment. To henna and rouge and powder her would have been to paint the lily.

Like Dick's, her customers looked at her with an envious admiration. But Anna was not vain. She was good at her job, and she liked her work in the beauty parlor of the Hotel Hudsonbilt.

Her one discouragement was the fact that while she knew Dick loved her, he never had proposed. If it had not annoyed her, she would have thought his boasting funny. Especially when he told her that he might consider an offer from the screen.

Of course, he was only hoping. She knew that well enough. But she didn't relish the idea of Dick's becoming the popular idol of feminine movie fans. Not that men with less brains than Dick had not achieved that fame!

Yet, in a way, his cinema thoughts were not at all surprising. Simon Bloom's was a costume shop, and its fascinating atmosphere was one of make-believe. From fitting out pageants, to renting a suit to wear at Hallowe'en, Bloom's had every sort of garb that could be well imagined. Boxes and shelves of fancy dress stirred Dick's imagination. Often when old Bloom had gone, Dick would linger and array himself in fancy raiment.

He would pose before the pier-glass as

a pirate or a Turk, a cavalier or a grandee of the Spanish court. He envied the men who went to balls and danced with dainty maskers; but Dick himself had never been to any such affair. One of these days, by some hook or crook, he meant to. And he often wondered how Anna would look in one of those spangled costumes labeled "Neptune's Daughter."

This evening, however, Bolton wished that masquerades and costumes had never been invented. It was already half past eight and this was Thursday night. This meant that Anna would be through in precisely half an hour.

Dick had a date to take her to the Crillion Theater. A film of Jean Carvalho's was there, and Dick was keen to see it. He fancied that the actor somewhat resembled him. But, of course, Carvalho did not have Dick's poise, his elegance of manner, and his graceful movements.

Anna had told him that one night—with amusement in her eyes. However, Dick Bolton believed her.

Iratly, Dick called upstairs to the sewing room. How much longer must he wait, was what he wished to know. "Say, I can't stick around all night!" he announced in an angry tone.

"Go bite holes in cheese!" growled a voice from the upper floor. "Then sit on a tack and be comfortable. I've got four buttons to sew on—and I ain't had no supper!"

The tailor who was also detained on this costume order, was also in ill humor.

Bolton sighed and assumed a pose before the looking glass. He was aping the manner of the man who had come in that afternoon, in a hurry for the costume. The Hon. Archibald Trevington, according to his card.

He did not look like Bolton, but their build was about the same. Now Dick mimicked, with fair success, this patron's haughty manner. Dick, in fact, had almost gasped when Trevington had entered and drawlingly asked for him.

"A manicure at the Hudsonbilt told me of your shop," the Englishman explained.

Dick was at once elated. Since Anna

had sent him this customer, he would earn a small commission. On the strength of it, he had called her up and proposed the evening's treat.

In a way, it was fortunate that Anna was involved. When he explained, she would understand why Dick would be delayed. It was also a piece of luck that the costume was to go to a man at the Hudsonbilt.

Dick had agreed to meet Anna there at the basement entrance. He only hoped that she would not leave before he could arrive. One of her virtues was promptness. This would not be the first time she had declined to wait for Dick.

Downstairs, from the sewing room, came Morrison with the suit. He dumped it on the table and shuffled from the shop. Bolton stood glaring after him.

Then he caressed the softness of the silk and velvet suit. A Louis XVI courtier—with rapier and buckled shoes—a black and silver domino—and a hat with plumes.

What was a minute more or less? Dick proposed to try it on.

He rather fancied himself in the thing as he strutted back and forth. Then, recalling something he must take from the office safe, Bolton crossed to it.

While being measured that afternoon, the Hon. Archie Trevington had dropped his cards of admission to the Madison Bal Masque. Dick had found them after he left, and Trevington had asked him to bring them with the costume.

"Not so bad!" Dick smiled to himself. Probably that meant a tip. Largesse was, of course, for menials; but Dick could use the money.

Putting the cards on the table, he began to discard the suit. The telephone interrupted the disrobing.

Maybe it was Anna. She might wonder what had happened. So he went to answer it.

"Are you there?" inquired a voice. Dick admitted that he was.

"This is Mr. Trevington," the caller went on to explain. "Don't send that bally costume. I'm not going to the ball. Remember, you're *not* to send it! Do you understand?"

Dick Bolton did, and it got his goat. For an hour he'd been waiting to take that suit to the Hudsonbilt. Now the idiot changed his mind, and said he didn't want it.

That meant he would not pay for it. He'd ordered it C. O. D. Dick would get no commission and no extra fee.

"What about these admission cards?" Dick had a bright idea. Charity charged ten dollars apiece for each of the little pasteboards. They were issued in Trevington's name—for himself and a guest.

"Tear them up, old chap!" said the voice. "I'm sure I've no use for them. Wouldn't have troubled you if I'd known. No end sorry, you know."

Dick was going to reply, but the wire was dead. He'd have liked to tell that honorable what he thought of him. Simon Bloom would be furious, and Dick would get the blame. The Englishman must have been crazy.

"The cheap skate!" muttered Dick.

Then, as he still held the telephone, he had a bright idea. Here was a chance he never had dreamed would ever come to him.

On his back he had the costume. In his hand the admission cards. That Neptune's Daughter costume, on the shelf up there, surely would fit Anna!

He lifted the receiver and called the Hudsonbilt. It seemed an age until the exchange gave him the barber shop. Luckily Anna had not gone. She was most apologetic.

"I couldn't help it, Dick," she said. "I'll tell you when I see you—"

"Don't waste time now!" he cut her short. "I've a scheme that's too good to be true. We're going to have a party that'll be some blowout. Put your little foot on the gas, and hop right over here!"

"To the shop you mean?" Anna demurred. "I'll wait here till you come."

"No good!" Dick objected. "The party starts from here. Come over as quick as you can."

With curious eyes, she arrived about ten minutes later. Dick thought she had never looked prettier. Haste and her excitement had lent color to her cheeks. Two blue

eyes stared at him questioningly—plainly amazed to recognize Dick as the colorful cavalier.

"My lady, the costume awaits you!" He swept her an elaborate bow and pointed to the table. Anna thought he had lost his mind.

"What's the idea?" She broke into a smile. Her slender fingers touched the pile of silver-shot green silk that Dick pointed out. "Did the customer I sent you invite you to the ball?"

Anna's eyes danced with mischief, as though she enjoyed some joke. Dick hastily explained. He thought that she seemed hesitant, and tried to interrupt him, but he rattled on.

"Don't be a goose! It's a perfect cinch!" he assured her boastfully. "Behold the admission cards—worth ten bucks apiece! Some fairy's waved a magic wand and this is our big night."

"But Dick, it would be silly to go—"

"Silly your aunt!" he laughed. "Run on into the dressing room. That's it, over there. When you come out, the manicure will be a lady-fish!"

"You're a lunatic already!" she told him with conviction.

But he would not be subdued.

"Do you mean to say that you're going to crab such a wonderful adventure? Why, Anna, the Social Register will be there in regiments! Haven't you ever wished for a peep at one of these affairs. No one will guess who we are. I can swing the bluff. So can you. It's easy. When you want to pretend, all you do is *believe* you are pretending."

"Oh, is it?" Anna asked doubtfully. "Just what'll we pretend?"

"That we're not ourselves, but some one else. That's where the fun comes in. Tonight, I'm not Dick Bolton. I'm the Hon. Archie Trevington. And you're not a manicure. You're a *débutante*."

"I'm just plain ninny if I agree!" Anna still shook her head.

"Oh, darn it all!" protested Dick. "Have you no imagination? Don't you ever long for romance? Come on! Be a sport. Get the costume on. I'll phone for a taxi."

Anna stood looking at him doubtfully; a curious, wistful expression on her pretty features.

It was plain that she did not approve—that it was on the tip of her tongue to try to reason with him. And yet a certain sympathy—a motherly understanding—made her change her mind.

"All right," she said, "I'm willing to go—"

"Willing?" he broke in indignantly. "I should think you'd be delighted. Thousands of girls in this old town would give anything to be there."

"Possibly," said Anna. "But, Dick, you've got to promise me—if anything unpleasant occurs—"

"Stop glooming!" he interrupted. "Put on your gladsome garments while I phone for a yellow coach. Four bits instead of four white mice will propel this chariot!"

"Silly!" she smiled, and disappeared with the costume in her hands.

Dick posed before the mirror, strutted about on his high heels, and bowed and scraped to his heart's content, until she came back. He certainly hoped she would enter into the spirit of the thing.

At least, Dick thought, she looked the part when she stepped from the little booth. He gasped at the vision of loveliness standing there before him.

She had been pretty enough before. Now she was exquisite. A frail little slip of a mermaid, with a wealth of golden hair. What luck it was not bobbed!

Her feet seemed even more tiny in those gleaming silver shoes. It was really a crime to hide her face with that silken mask. But her blue eyes beamed at him through its slits—with a mocking light in them. Her elfin manner was suggestive of some newborn mischief.

"All right, let's go," she said, and her cheeks flushed beneath her mask.

Anna saw Dick's admiration and naturally it pleased her. With a little sigh, she began to wish they were what they were pretending—that she was a society bud and Dick a wealthy idler. But she did not mean to let him know the present trend of her thoughts. Anna hated bluff—as much as she loved Dick.

As he helped her into the taxicab, Bolton actually seemed to assume the rôle that he had chosen. In imagination, he fancied himself an honorable in fact.

To be riding in a taxi, with a pretty girl at his side, was a new experience. On twenty-five dollars a week in New York taxis are not come by frequently. But just this once, he meant to enjoy the sensation to the full.

After the ball, in the cold, gray dawn of to-morrow's reality, his dream might be gone forever. In the meantime, Dick assumed an air of careless ennui.

In the semidarkness of the cab, Anna smiled to herself at his acting. She thought Dick was more English than this Trevington man himself.

Something else amused her, and she suppressed a little giggle. But when Dick desired to know what she thought was funny, Anna declined to tell him.

The cab drew up at the porte-côchère of the Hudsonbilt. Anna had never entered that imposing hostelry by these gorgeous doors. Now Dick helped her from the cab with an air of chivalry, as though she was a princess.

They crossed the soft floor of the lounge and paused before the lift. Men and women in evening clothes stared at the two in costume. Those who loitered in the lobby, were watching with curious interest the steady stream of arriving guests bound for the bal masque.

Naturally, they could not know that these two were impostors. Certainly they looked their parts, and several who followed their movements, wondered who the two might be.

On the topmost floor, in an anteroom, Dick handed his admission cards to a gold-laced flunky. He did not know that Anna recognized most of the hotel attendants. If they had known that Dick's companion was a manicure downstairs, the obsequious staff would have collapsed and sunk right through the floor.

In the room where she left her cloak—which was also from Bloom's shelves—Anna took the precaution not to remove her mask. The chattering girls who powdered and rouged, and peered at them-

selves in the mirrors, gave her scant attention.

But as she returned to the foyer, Anna was instantly aware of men's admiring glances. Her heart gave a leap as she realized the meaning of their approval. Her manner as well as her costume made them believe that she belonged there.

Well, there wouldn't be any doubt about Dick. She saw him by the entrance of the brilliant ballroom. Nonchalant in his attitude, he might have been an honor guest instead of an interloper.

"Dick," said Anna, and drew him aside, "we mustn't forget the time. It won't do to stay here till every one unmasks."

"Suppose we dance." He ignored her words. His accent was even more pronounced than Archie Trevington's.

Anna was somewhat annoyed. There was no need to pretend with her. She thought Dick rather childish.

Then, as he took her in his arms, and they glided off, she remembered that she loved him. What was more, she recalled that Dick was a perfectly gorgeous dancer.

Even to Anna, the scene was like a glimpse of fairyland. The ballroom was a bower of blooms and colored lights. The floor was thronged with a motley of exotic characters.

There were monks and cardinals, Romans, Egyptians, troubadours; Colonial Dames and Carmens, Indian maids and placid nuns, and hula-hula girls. Soft lights and mingled perfumes; gleaming jewels and flashing eyes.

The syncopating music was entrancingly sensuous. It seemed to Anna that they trod a hazy, rose-hued cloud. In spite of her misgivings, she was almost glad they'd come.

Now a man who was dressed like Captain Kidd deliberately cut-in. Dick had been utterly helpless. He'd had to relinquish Anna. But as he stood staring after his partner and her captor, a girl in harem silks and veils whispered in his ear:

"Aren't you going to dance with me?" Her tone was softly mocking. "I'm crazy to know who you are—and I just can't guess."

Dick wondered who the girl was. Should

he confess to her that he was Archie Trevington? He wondered what her reaction would be if he tried that little bluff.

"Sorry," he said, "but you'll have to wait. To tell you would spoil the fun." It would be too dangerous to play his part too far.

In the arms of the pirate captain, Anna also underwent a friendly questioning. Her refusal to divulge her name was natural enough.

As they tangoed on, she forgot her qualms and flirted outrageously. Now and then they passed close to Dick and his harem queen. Anna smiled as she realized that Dick was growing jealous—in spite of the attractiveness of the girl who danced with him.

"I'll follow you all evening," the pirate captain threatened. "But I'm sure I know you now. If I get a chance I'll carry you off. My ship's out in the Hudson—with the black flag at the masthead!"

She knew it was foolish banter; but somehow his threat of following her made Anna feel uneasy. With a sigh of relief, she slipped away when the orchestra stopped playing.

Gay laughter and confusion reigned. She had considerable trouble in finding Dick again. At last she came across him, near the door of a room that had been made a great conservatory.

"So there you are!" came Dick's slow drawl. Then he dropped his rôle. "Let's find a quiet spot out here. I want to talk to you."

Relieved to find that they were alone, Anna sat down on a bench. They were sheltered by a bank of palms. No one appeared to be near them.

"Have people been asking you who you are?" Dick blurted out at once.

"Why, yes," said Anna. "Why shouldn't they? Every one's probably guessing."

"No such thing!" Dick denied. "All of them know each other. Do you suppose they're checking up—that maybe Trevington is here—and they're suspicious of us!"

"Why should they be?" asked Anna, challenge in her tone. "Why spoil it all with silly fears? It's no crime to crash a gate. The worst they could do if they

found out would be to put us out. In a sense, it's a public party."

"Three husky chaps in evening clothes keep walking after me," Dick told her nervously.

"You only imagine it!" Anna scoffed. She observed Dick's nervousness. "I thought you said we'd just pretend—and enjoy ourselves." She could not resist that dig.

"There's one of those guys, over there!" Dick whispered, and Anna turned.

She saw a face peer through the palms, then quickly disappear. Unmasked, and plainly unfriendly, the heavy features of the man gave Anna a little start.

"Let's go into the supper room—as though we didn't see him. Then, when we've had a bite to eat, I think we'd better go," she suggested.

Willingly, Dick arose. As they sauntered toward the tables where refreshments were being served, Dick felt more uncomfortable. That red-faced fellow, he felt sure, dogged his every footstep.

Now, Anna herself observed the man glancing in their direction. At his elbow was Captain Kidd, who had boasted that his pirate ship was anchored in the Hudson. That the two were discussing her and Dick was plainly obvious.

Instead of perturbing Anna, the knowledge of their scrutiny made her laugh softly.

Dick plainly showed the tension of the situation. He spilled his coffee and dropped ice cream on his silken waistcoat. If he'd ever felt a desire to act, it abruptly left him now. Yet, to save his soul, he didn't know why he should be on edge.

Wasn't this what he had wanted to do, and wasn't Anna, apparently, having a splendid time? Nevertheless, he'd feel relieved when both the costumes they had on were back on old Bloom's shelves.

"Shall we dance once more—and then slip out?" Anna had finished her ice.

"Maybe we'd better—go at once."

Dick pushed back his chair. As he did so, three big men paused beside their table. In lieu of costumes, each of them was dressed in evening clothes. Their hands and feet seemed much too large, and all of them had thick necks.

"Are you Mr. Trevington?" the tallest of them asked. It seemed to Dick he had never seen a man so powerful. "The Honorable Archibald Trevington?" Dick's question amplified.

Dick flushed, and then turned pale. In a panic, he looked at Anna; but her mask hid her expression. Her eyes were fixed on the face of the man who towered over Dick.

"I—I don't know—am I?" Dick replied.

In appeal he looked to Anna. She did not reply, but bowed her head. Her shoulders shook with emotion.

"You came in on Mr. Trevington's card?" persisted the big man.

"Why, yes, you see—" Dick stammered, in an effort to explain. Who was this fellow anyhow? Should he confess the truth?

"Well then, you both can step out with us!" snapped the leader of the three. "If you come along very quietly, no one will know the difference."

"If you'll listen just a moment—" Dick was thoroughly frightened. He had visions of cells and handcuffs. That bulge in this man's evening coat would be a gun or handcuffs!

"Get a move on!" came the order.

Ten minutes later, Anna and Dick stepped from a side entrance of the Hudsonbilt. Their three big escorts guided them to a waiting cab. Two got in with Anna and Dick. The other sat beside the chauffeur.

"Precinct station," Dick heard him tell the driver of the cab.

Except that they were under arrest, Dick had no conception of what was about to happen to them. Neither as yet had removed the masks. Anna sat in silence and Dick hoped that she was not crying.

The cab shot swiftly forward through lanes of twinkling lights. It seemed to Dick that as long as he lived, never again did he desire to ride in a taxicab.

Anna's silent mood made matters worse. She would never forgive him for this. And yet, he tried to excuse himself, it was partly her own fault that they were in this fix. If she hadn't sent the man to the shop they wouldn't have been at the ball.

Confound this fellow Trevington!

Just what was the big idea? When they reached the proper officer, Dick was determined to protest against this brutal outrage. Hadn't a man with admission cards a perfect right to take a girl to a dance if it suited him?

But when he entered the hearing room of the precinct station, Dick's belligerence left him as a duck's back sheds a shower. Trembling and clutching at the rail, he and Anna stood before the desk as the sergeant examined them.

"Take off them masks!" he ordered.

With a graceful gesture, Anna bared her features. More clumsily, Dick complied and tried to look more self-possessed.

"Well, I'll be junked!" exclaimed the detective who had arrested them.

He stared at Anna like a man who thinks he has seen a ghost. Dick was too dazed to wonder what would take place next.

"Is this the bird?" the sergeant asked, indicating Dick.

"Certainly not!" chorused the three men in evening clothes.

"You mean that—the real Trevington—has given you the slip?" The sergeant taunted them.

"Go roll a hoop in Central Park!" sniffed the red-faced giant. "You're talking to house detectives from the Hudsonbilt—not a bunch of sleuth hounds of the police department. The real Mr. Archie Trevington's at a polo tournament. This morning this girl tells me that a guy comes into her shop—"

"What shop?" asked the sergeant.

"Barber shop, Hudsonbilt. She's a manicure. The guy who came in wanted her to varnish up his nails. While she's workin', he asks her where he can get a costume. If she hadn't told me, he'd have pulled the trick."

"Have you any idea what you're talking about?" The sergeant was impatient.

"If you knew how to listen, you'd find out! And don't forget you're addressin' Tim O'Shaughnessy. I discovered that some one had jimmied his way into Trevington's rooms. Nothing seemed to be taken, but whoever had been there had gone through his correspondence case. That gives me a bright idea—on top of Miss Anna's

story. Some guy's goin' to say he's Trev-
ington and go to the fancy ball—"

"This is the fellow who did it?" Dick
was pointed at.

"Nix!" O'Shaughnessy shook his head.
"This guy's a poor simp!"

Furious, Dick gaped at him, but at a sign
from Anna he did not interrupt.

"The fellow we were lookin' for has a
flock o' names. I had him spotted as a
crook when he took Room 706. But he
checks out at seven o'clock to-night and
takes his bags and baggage—after he pays
his bill."

"The fellow who ordered the costume—
and later canceled it? You may be clever,
O'Shaughnessy. I don't get the big idea?"

"That's because you're stupid," the
house detective sniffed. "He must have
got on to the fact that we had our eyes on
him. If this guy had brought him the cos-
tume, we'd have known that we were
right."

"The fellow was slick enough to drop
his two admission cards down at Simon
Bloom's. When he finds the game is up,
he phones and stops delivery before the
costume comes. He knew that if he took
it in—and he had the admission cards—
we'd nab him on the spot."

"Well, since he's gone, what's the idea
of these two dressing up?"

"That's something for the police to learn.
It's too much for a house detective." O'Shaughnessy glanced at Anna with a
good-natured grin. "You tell him, sister,"
he advised. "You'd better come through
with the truth."

"What she says can be used against her,"
warned the man behind the desk.

"What she says could be used against a
saint!" O'Shaughnessy exploded. "Miss
Anna's as square as she's pretty. What
she's up to, I don't know."

"Thank you," said Anna gratefully, and
turned toward the sergeant.

Quietly she told him how they had come
to go to the ball. "I suppose it was very
foolish—but it seemed an opportunity too
tempting to resist."

The precinct sergeant grinned. "All
right, kiddo!" He nodded his head. "Take

your beau and go on home. Both of you're
discharged."

"Please," she slyly winked at him, "may
I speak to you alone?"

"I'll say you can!" The sergeant
beamed in spite of his amazement at this
strange request. "O'Shaughnessy, take the
actor here, and your heavy-footed guys, in-
to the next room."

At a gesture from Anna, O'Shaughnessy
did as he was bidden. Perplexed, and
growing angry, Dick went with them in a
state of stunned bewilderment. He
wondered what Anna was going to do, but
the three detectives led him quickly out of
earshot.

"What is it, sister?" the sergeant asked.
"Are you hankerin' to have this guy spend
some time in jail?"

"Oh, no!" she protested winsomely.
"But I don't want him released. Can't
you hold him on probation—or is it on
parole? You see, I knew from O'Shaugh-
nessy what was bound to happen. I wanted
to explain to Dick, but he wouldn't let me.
So I never said a word and went. I thought
it might teach him a lesson."

"Yeah?" the sergeant questioned.
"Whaddye mean a lesson?"

"Dick's always pretending he's some-
thing that he really isn't. I want him to
cut out dreaming—and get down to work."

"So he can buy you a wedding ring?"
The officer smiled at her.

"Yes," Anna said demurely. "Can't
you hold him for the magistrate—and get
him to make Dick promise that he won't
pretend or bluff—just be his own real self?"
There was earnest appeal in her tone—an
emotion that stirred the official.

"I can!" he said and chuckled. "The
judge is a good sport. You go stay with
the matron, and I'll have your beau locked
up. In the morning the judge'll give him
the choice of a month out on the island—
or a wedding here in court. But, daughter,
are you certain that you want this bird?"

"Oh, yes! If he'll just be himself—quit
boasting and be natural." Anna blushed
and nodded. Then her blue eyes sparkled.
"Sometimes pretending's risky," she said.
"So I won't pretend I don't."



The Evil Panorama

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "'Geechee Shad,'" "Moonglow," "Alkali," "Me: Gangster," etc.

CHAPTER XXI.

EMBARKATION.

THE words were a bombshell. The uncle gasped in amazement. Colonel Raynor tapped on the table top with his fingers and pursed his lips in speculation. Tad Raynor flushed with pleasure, held his hand toward the girl, and smiled again as she accepted it in hearty grip.

"God knows you may trust me, Miss Barbara!" he promised. "But I still think it foolhardy for you to attempt the trip. You see, these men will have reached the claim by the time we can get there! It will be hot fighting, nip and tuck—"

"No one gets the maps unless I go!" Barbara Howland snapped. "Plan everything on that." There was finality in her tone.

"I reckon you're going, Miss Barbara," Tad Raynor said slowly. "Because I surely am! And I can't go without the maps!"

"Uncle Ned is such a dear," Barbara Howland admitted when the gate of San Francisco fell away into the gloom of distance. "But he is most trying at times, Tad! Fancy his attempting to stop me!"

"I suppose he's right, if truth must out," Raynor grunted. "But I'm right satisfied that everything is settled and we're on our way, Barb! You can bet I'll do my best to look out for you!"

There was a warmth of tone in his words that did not escape the girl and, if she was annoyed by it, she gave no sign. Rather, she seemed to look forward to the adventure ahead even as keenly as did Raynor himself.

They stood at the rail of the ship as it

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plowed its way toward the distant North. The calm sea was washed in a glow of glorious sunshine, the sky overhead marred but not even the fleeci-est of clouds.

The girl was dressed as a boy, her hair close cropped, her limbs incased in baggy trousers that slipped into heavy though small boots at her knees.

Raynor wore his pistol plainly shown, the girl wore one with the butt only exposed above her belt. They talked of what lay ahead and, in return for stories of the older West, the girl told the detailed story of her father.

"He was always adventurous, Tad," she began. "Never a man like his brother, to remain at home and live moderately upon what he could earn from his profession.

"He was but a lad when the gold rush of '49 roused the world, but he dreamed of explorations and fortunes to be won from the earth in out-of-the-way corners of the world.

"At the close of the war—he fought with the Union—he never could settle down to home life again. He dreamed too much of riches and adventure. As if by an act of Providence, mother died at that time. Father left me in school and set out on his treasure hunt.

"From time to time we heard of him, but the letters were months old when we got them. First he came to Frisco, then north to Seattle. After that his letters stopped and we know now, that he was in Alaska. What originally attracted him there we never shall know.

"The next we heard was from the packet of charts and the letters he sent with them, and the gold that he intrusted to Captain Mack of the schooner which looped the Horn. Mack told me himself that father gave him nearly a hundred thousand dollars in a separate gold poke for his delivery of the fortune I now have and the maps to the claim.

"It has all become clear to us since meeting you and your father. It is easy to see that my father planned to return and mine more gold. He knew that he had let his secret leak out aboard that terrible Gold Bug, and he knew that his life was not safe.

"With that in mind he intrusted the gold and the maps to the captain to take to me. It was well that he did so; that very night—"

Tad Raynor slipped his fingers along the rail, and patted her hand consolingly. After that they talked of other things.

"It was just about a year ago that the Tiger—or the Adder—was wrecked off Nome," Raynor explained. "The men who escaped necessarily fled to the interior, for they were wanted for mutiny and murder.

"Either they remained inside at the claim, or they waited a few weeks until the ice drove the cutters downward and then outfitted at Nome and took the winter trail to the claim.

"They will have a year start on us. But they may never have reached there. They may have fought among themselves, or died of exposure, or perhaps frozen before they ever outfitted!

"There is no telling about that until we get there. But guessing that they made their way through, it's reasonable to think they found the claim all your father said it was and are hoarding gold while the law is forgetting them, so to speak, Barb.

"Your father named the claim after you, and by that name it had become known all along the Coast.

"Don't you see the position that places them in, Barb? They won't dare file on it because to do that will be to admit their identity! All they can do is work it for all it is worth, and get out with enough money to care for them as long as they live.

"The way I figure things, they wouldn't come out this summer. Summer is when they can work best because the ground will not be frozen so hard. They'll wait till the snow comes in two months or so, then make a dash for the States with what they have, and go back for more if they want to, next year."

The girl agreed with him and he caught in her eyes the light of hatred that reflected from her thoughts. She was a courageous little thing, he knew. She had no fear of the terrible trip ahead, none of the men they must meet.

Like her father, she met whatever pre-

sented with the best of skill, and courage, and strength which she had to offer.

The two grew closer than they knew on that voyage toward the north. Day after day went blissfully by on the wings of plans and a growing intimacy which they never thought to measure.

In Tad Raynor the girl found the sort of thing she liked to find in men. He was frank and clean and open, strong and ready to trust his strength. Perhaps, at times, in his youthful daring, he was a bit reckless. She liked that.

He was a fine figure of a man, she saw, fully six feet in height and a hundred and eighty pounds of muscle and bone. His eyes were pools which caught and reflected the gifts of dreams, and shone with a warmth and brilliance that fascinated her.

On his part, Raynor found the girl like a new world. Her soft, white skin, spotted now, with roses on the cheeks from the fresh air about them and clear with the vibrant health of youth and strength, enthralled him.

Her voice was like the trill of a bird to him, and in her eyes seemed to repose treasures far greater than those of the Barb Claim they sought to wrest from the hands of Jerk Rann and French Pierre.

Raynor was certain the two men were together, and he leaned toward the belief that their purpose in seizing the sealing ship was to offer a medium of transportation to Nome rather than to kill seal.

At night, when the breath of the sea air was upon them and the wash of the water about them, the two were wont to stand in talk on the bow of the little packet that bore them. Stars took on a scintillating brilliance in the heavens; the moon shone with a white radiance that silvered the sea, and shadowed the decks with an artistry past description.

Tad Raynor told of his life, of his father's mighty work for right in the new land they had left. He related tales of the gold days when men were poverty-stricken one day and rolling in fabulous wealth the next.

The girl whispered of the East and the great city where the homes were illuminated with gas and every convenience was offered dwellers. She spoke of the gorgeous car-

riages in which people rode the smooth streets, and of the horse-drawn tram cars that crawled through the business section of the city.

Of the Hudson and the Palisades, Tad liked most to hear. The girl told of the steamers that ran through the river clear to Albany, and of the wonders that must follow the coming of the railroad to San Francisco just as they had to New York.

When the nights became rich with the tang of the Arctic, they wrapped themselves in heavier clothing and remained out in the air. They lived unto themselves and a few other passengers, and the crew soon learned that such a life was sufficient unto them.

During stormy weather—for when they struck the fog banks the rain appeared also and they were driven into cabins—the two planned their course at Nome. Tad had names of men to see and stores where his father's name would carry vast weight.

Thus it was that when finally the long voyage ended, the two were welded together with bonds of understanding that even they did not suspect. Each knew the other; each relied wholly upon the other, and each found the other quite a world with which to live and from which to draw the best that life offered.

But always their mission was uppermost. In all those days Tad Raynor made no mention of personality; no word or indication of love crept into their relationship. It was simply a perfect trust and understanding.

They spent hours over the maps the girl carried, read them until they might have thrown them away and still retained a perfect mental picture of the tracings, with each important spot indelibly stamped upon their memory.

And so they came to Nome, unchanged from the Nome which had greeted Jerk Rann and Gatchell and French Pierre. But the greeting accorded them was different. The letters that Tad carried brought instant and courteous attention in addition to expert advice.

From the principal storekeeper of the town Tad learned that it was best to wait for the coming of the snows, then to start

forth with at least two dog-sleds well stocked with provisions.

The snow, said the storekeeper, was their salvation for traveling, but would easily prove their damnation should they lose their way or go unprepared to meet its terrible requirements.

From Eskimos, Indians, and trappers, the necessary outfits were recruited, while the soft slush of October crept over the waters of the bay, and the air became tart and invigorating with the first breaths of winter.

Nome saw annually the passing of its ships, stood at the water's edge and waved a farewell, then turned to face its long months of frozen solitude.

Extreme care was shown in the selection of guides. Men who knew the country to be traveled and who had made of the distant Yukon a camping ground and highway from the Klondike to the Sound were pressed into service at handsome pay.

Four Indians were engaged as guides. Two sleds were outfitted, each with its separate tent and supplies. Furs were provided plentifully on Tad's assurance that speed was less of a factor than comfort or safety.

When the snow came the two received it much as had Jerk Rann and Gatchell before them.

It was a starting signal, the dawning of the hour they had looked forward to for months. They were thrilled by the first flake that fluttered from the gray heavens above them.

Barbara Howland clapped her hands in delight as the ice of the bay hardened and the wind swept across it with the frigid whisper of the Arctic.

She clung to Tad Raynor's arm spell-bound as the flake multiplied itself into a million flakes that suddenly filled the air about them and blotted out all things but a streaking circle of white that enveloped them.

It snowed steadily for three days, the soft flakes piling high in the narrow streets blocking, except for the rugged, the trails from house to house. Nome had received its winter coat, and under it must lie for months and months until the spring sun

should appear again and open the short summer season.

The world had become a thing of gray and white, and into that world the two teams set forth on the strangest mission that ever Nome had seen. Beside the rear sled Tad Raynor trotted. Beside Tad Raynor, Barbara Howland ran, her lithe body falling into a swinging trot with all the grace of an Indian.

The air was brisk and bitter cold, the snow about the runners whirled upward in powdery clouds, and swished about their flying feet like water that had suddenly powdered.

Tad shouted to the girl, held forth his hand, and she caught it and they trotted together, holding hands, the girl steadying herself a little against the uncertain footing she found. Presently they struck Anvil Creek, and the Indians proclaimed the ice more than solid enough for to travel on.

So they went, the parkas close about their faces, their hands incased in mittens, the dogs slipping and skidding on glare ice, but moving steadily onward nevertheless. On each side of the creek the pines stood as though in patient contemplation of this cavalcade.

Now and then Tad insisted that the girl ride the sled beside him, and thus avoid overdoing. At such times she felt the thrill of this new and white land; sensed its implacability and its vastness. Never had she known such things, and her mind reacted to them in both childish delight and sober thought.

At midday they stopped, and the Indians prepared them a meal of which they partook ravenously.

"Lord!" Raynor said, as he warmed his stiff hands over the little fire. "Ain't this a country for you, Barb! I've heard of it a million times, and read more—but I never realized it could be like this! Look! See that bird? It's a ptarmigan; we'll eat a few of those before long!"

And at night, with a pine fire burning at their feet and a warm supper to strengthen them against the gripping and ceaseless cold, Barbara sat by and watched Tad Raynor as he smoked his pipe. Something

of the solitude and might of this land oppressed her a little.

She drew close to him and her mittened hand caught his arm and clung there. Suddenly he reached behind her, brought his big arm close about her body, and lifted her against him.

"Feel the cold too much, Barb?" he asked tenderly. "Keep up close to me and don't let that wind hit you—great country, ain't it? Gee! And what a little winner you are, Barb! I never knew girls could travel like we have to-day!"

"I didn't mind. I loved it, Tad," she said softly. "It is a marvelous country, isn't it? But a terrible one, too! Imagine being here alone!" She shuddered a little at the thought.

He laughed away her fears in his hearty way, and she snuggled inside his arm, watched as the smoke clouds of his pipe seemed to be devoured by the frost-laden air and whipped away into oblivion the instant they ventured from the folds of his parka.

In the near distance a wolf howled, its lugubrious wail stalking through the trees with a malicious note, its disconsolate hunger and yearning like the voice of a strange and imprisoned and persecuted spirit of the vastness.

"Wolf!" Tad muttered. "Needn't be scared of 'em, Barb. Great cowards they are, and we've plenty of ammunition should they bother us at night with their howls."

"I could sleep to-night," Barbara said dreamily, "if my couch were one of sword-points—I'm that tired!"

The man laughed slowly, and his arm about her tightened in comforting assurance.

"But," the girl said a bit archly, "I want you to promise not to leave me alone for any reason—and to listen real hard in case I call!"

Tad Raynor promised that he would, then went to inspect her blankets, and see that all was as it should be in her little tent. The girl was standing at the flap of the tent when he came out.

"Everything fine!" he laughed. "The men that got these natives for us sure knew

the ones we needed, Barb. Sleep tight—never fear, I'll keep a watch for you! Wake up with the first crack of dawn, and we'll leave the creek and head almost due east to-morrow. Think you can stand another day of it without a rest?"

"I think so, Tad," the girl said softly, her hand catching his arm again. She stood very close to him and looked upward. "You look so huge in that fur," she laughed gently, "so very huge, and somehow vicious—like a bear!"

His hand found her shoulder, and he laughed and patted her.

"I'm not a bit, Barb!" he assured her. "Sleep tight and call if you want anything!"

The girl nodded and he felt a pressure of her hand on his arm. Then she slipped into the tent, and his last sight of her was as she glanced back at him. Her lovely eyes had taken on an infinite tenderness; a new light that thrilled him immeasurably.

He sat beside the fire and smoked another pipe load before turning into his own blankets, but even that wait did not remove from his mind the tender light of Barb's eyes nor yet did it convince him that the difference in the girl was realization on her part that now she was totally dependent upon him!

He wondered if there was something else, too—something such as stirred deep within himself.

CHAPTER XXII.

FROST.

THE next morning dawned clear and cold, the great pines snapping under the ministrations of frost and air pregnant with an icy breath that pierced through the thickest and warmest of clothing. Everywhere was stillness, inanition, silence.

The whole great world about the travelers was the antithesis of motion. It was as though everything had been gripped by frost and was held rigid and frozen in the clutch of winter.

The dogs of the teams roused from their huddle in the snow, their coats spangled

with particles much as though the very air about them had frozen and clung to their shaggy hair.

The natives fought off the numbness of cold, and forced themselves into warming activities. They heaped boughs upon the fire and fanned it into super-being while Tad Raynor and the girl stood close by its saving warmth.

Breakfast was a treat in that chill world. Warm coffee set blood to stirring where it had seemed to coagulate in their veins. Their strength and spirit rose, and Tad made pretense of examining Barb's parka and wraps to be certain that she would not freeze.

Yet their first motion beside and behind the sleds brought to them a glowing warmth that made effort a joy and privilege. There seemed to the girl no such thing as exhaustion throughout that brief, gray day.

The Indians shouted their commands, the dogs leaned into the traces, and the snow whined its incessant song of defeat as trees whirled behind them along their course.

It was a gorgeous experience, a thing that precluded all but the raw struggle for existence and tested the heart and the mind and the body of the men and dogs alike. They were the only life that showed during the bitter hours except here and there a ptarmigan or a snow-white rabbit that darted away from them in a frenzy of fear.

The noonday meal was a repetition of that served the day before, a tiny fire, a boiling pot, a pan of bacon, and biscuits from the packs. But it was a glorious meal. It roused resistance in them again and set them at the trail ahead with a will that was not to be denied.

Conversation on the trail was next to impossible. Barb opened her parka once to speak. For an hour afterward her cheeks stung with the cold as they might have from an acid douche. Her nostrils contracted and dried completely under touch of the clear, thin air, her throat felt burned, rather than chilled.

The inside of her parka became caked with frozen breath, and though she felt the effort of the running, she did not tire as she

had expected. To ride on the sled for any length of time was to find her limbs stiffened, and a general lassitude enveloping her from which it was most difficult to escape.

But finally the gray shadows lengthened into gloom, and Raynor called a halt for the night. The little tents appeared as if by magic from the sleds, and under the deft hands of the natives they took shape against the background of brown rock and white snow.

A fire roared its welcome song in the center of the little camp, its warmth being swept through the flaps of the tents by such air as stirred about the rocks.

Food aplenty was soon simmering. Clear, cold water quaffed from a tin cup quenched the thirst of running, and dried fish tossed to the malamutes created for a moment a wild snapping and snarling that soon died down as the milling animals burrowed into the snow and banked down for the freezing night ahead.

Once again the two travelers sat by the fireside. This time Tad Raynor could not summon the courage to slip his arm about the girl's body and hold her close to him. All day long the light he had seen in her eyes remained before his memory. It was a source of both happiness and unsuspected timidity to him.

Since having seen it he was different. It dawned upon him that he loved Barbara Howland, and it did not dawn upon him that Barbara Howland loved him.

In her every move he saw but the camaraderie they had enjoyed since the day of their meeting. He felt that the change was in himself, and that he must keep that change from the girl at all hazards.

It seemed cowardly of him to speak to this wonderful creature of love at a time and in a place such as this frozen waste. What had she to choose? He, and he alone, but for the four natives, spelled manhood to her at this time, manhood and protection.

He felt that he was lacking in manhood by harboring the strange thoughts that had come to his mind so suddenly. He hated himself, forced thoughts of love from his mind, only to succumb to them again when

Barb looked at him, and he recalled the tender fires he had noticed but the night before.

"We made good time and distance today," he ventured as she sat close at his side. But he did not look directly at her. He dared not.

"I think so, too," she agreed. "I think it's heaps colder, too, Tad, don't you? Or is it that we will continue to feel it more the longer we are exposed to it?"

"It's colder, Barb," he said slowly, "a lot colder. Have you suffered from it?"

"Not exactly. I know it's cold, all right—but running keeps me warm."

"When you remove your furs to-night, throw them outside the tent," he ordered casually. "You see, they get damp inside, and then they freeze. I'll dry them over the fire; you'll die of pneumonia if I don't!"

"Goodness—how terrible!" she shuddered in mock horror, then she slid closer, and Tad admitted to himself a sense of infinite discomfort and fear. He wanted to put his arm about her, yet the move seemed to him, somehow, unhallowed at the moment.

He smoked a good deal, talked of how soon they might expect to reach the claim, and what they might find when they did. Also, he expressed the wish that the sun would warm up enough during the day to soften the snow so that it could crust and freeze into better traveling surface.

Suddenly he realized that Barbara Howland had laid her head against his shoulder. He twisted his own head and looked down upon her.

In the warmth of the fire she had thrown back her parka, and he saw that she was asleep, her glorious face placid as the surface of a mill pond, her even breathing attesting the healthy weariness that had overcome her.

With an infinite tenderness he regarded her, sat for a long time, afraid to move for fear of rousing her. Then he knocked the dottle from his pipe and shook her gently. She opened her eyes.

"You must sleep, Barb," he said slowly; "don't forget the furs."

She entered her tent and shortly tossed out the garments. All around the fire the

natives were packed into the snow, their blankets tight about them. The whole world was quiet and vast and impressive.

As Tad Raynor dried the smaller garments he handled them with a gentleness that was supreme, his face wreathed in a look of awed glorification.

The cold snap held for four days, and the traveling dropped, during that time, into the established routine of efficiency. Each of the natives had his appointed tasks, and each of them worked silently and efficiently.

The snow whirled under the cavalcade during the daylight hours. At night comfortable camps were built, and the ravages of the cold and the ever-present enemies of man were kept at bay.

"You're a wonder, Barb!" Tad Raynor had said a thousand times as they sat together beside the fire at night.

"I'm not, at all," she laughed each time. "It's you who have managed things so well, Tad. I never suffer any discomfort. I have learned to trot all day without a great deal of weariness; it's the glorious air, I think. Anyway, one has to run or freeze as solid as ice!"

Not a single thing had they seen but the occasional birds and once a slinking wolf. Not a trace of mankind appeared on the white reaches of snow, no sound but the noises they made themselves, the infrequent howl of wolves, the flutter of a ptarmigan as it raced away from them.

They struck camp the morning of the fifth day while the night still enshrouded them. Only a trace of gray showed while they were stowing the sleds. This lengthened into the semi-gloom of Alaska day as they ate their breakfast. The pines loomed through the murk like huge beings who were creeping close to them.

Tad Raynor was lashing the last of the utensils to the rear sled and Barb stood at his side ready to start as day dawned. Visibility rose and the girl suddenly uttered a low cry and caught at Tad's arm. There was terror in the cry, and the man whirled toward her.

Speechless, she pointed across the little clearing where they had camped. What he saw was unmistakable.

"God!" he said feelingly. "God—it's—a man!"

Swinging from the limb of a tree, the skull—askew—staring blankly down upon them, a bag of fur clothes that was partly filled with bones, and spangled with the diamonds of the frosty air, hung the earthly remains of a body.

The girl shrank back from the ghastly sight. The natives huddled together in amazed fear. Raynor dropped the lashing, and went slowly toward the gruesome find.

Even through the passing of a winter and a summer, there clung to the horrible thing evidence of the vengeance of French Pierre. The face of the body was gone; the legs, well above the knees, had been torn away by some slashing force, the bones showing clearly the marks of teeth that had scraped them hungrily.

Raynor saw it all, realized the hideousness of the vengeance that had been wreaked upon this unfortunate man, the hatred that must have inspired this torment, the horrors of the death that had overtaken him.

Reverently he freed the rope that suspended the thing and lowered it, rattling, to the ground. What a scarecrow it was! Chest bones, ribs, dangling arms, and a skull!

While Barbara Howland turned away, Tad Raynor dragged the terrible object from her sight and attempted to dig for it a decent grave. This he found impossible. The ground had been frozen as solid as concrete to a depth of three or four feet.

He scooped a hole in the snow and there laid his find away. There was no fear, he knew, of wolves. The bones of the man were dried, rattling within what remained of his clothing.

Already the wolves had had their feast, Raynor saw, feasted while yet the helpless man fought them off with his free legs, probably, and the fiend who had trapped him stood near gloating!

What crime, he wondered, could any man commit that would possibly warrant such an end as had been his?

So Barbara Howland and Tad Raynor found the man they sought, and in the finding they were ignorant of his identity. Ray-

nor handled his remains with what tenderness the occasion permitted, then went slowly back to the sleds, patted Barb on the shoulder by way of encouragement, and gave the order that started the race onward.

He little knew that his particular goal was wrapped in that bundle of clothes back in the drifting snow!

CHAPTER XXIII.

BARB!

IN the days that followed, a monotony of glory spread itself before the travelers.

The incident of the suspended body had a dire effect upon them, however. None could travel this land of frozen death without feeling its might, without a definite fear of its never-ending menace.

That, coupled with the gruesome evidence of still another sort of death which lay hidden in the fastness of the snow, had a tendency to wake both Raynor and the girl to the primeval, almost the abysmal, qualities that hovered over their every moment of life.

The days were identical. Nothing arose to change the trek except the altering of the topography of the land they covered. They were out, now, where the hills had altered into mountains, and the rugged fastness set trials of travel for them that strained even the ingenuity of the Indians.

Their heavy train had offered unending comforts when the traveling was smooth and rapid. Now they were a trial at times. Sheer walls of icy rock sometimes rose to block their way. Then came killing detours and exhausting climbs that sapped the energy of men and dogs alike.

But the nights were glorious. Seated about the camp fire Tad and the girl talked as only two people can talk who feel the first murmurings of love, and are spurred on by a solitude that leaves naught in the world but each other.

The lad told of his ambitions, of the work his father had done before him, and how he had tried to fit in as a natural successor to the colonel.

"He is the greatest man that ever lived,

Barb," he would say enthusiastically. "He has more plain courage than any other man who ever hit the Gold Coast! Everybody says so! They say without dad law never could have come to Frisco—and I've always tried to be like him."

At such times the girl would encourage him to talk by her interested silence. The situation was conducive to the baring of inner thoughts. She caught something of the fineness of this great lad with his wonderful physique and his ideals. It dawned on Barbara Howland that the Barb claim had paled somewhat in importance. Something else had come that superseded it in her heart and mind. That something was Tad Raynor. She knew that she loved him.

But, manlike, Raynor appeared not to see the light of love in her eyes. His constant courtesy and thoughtfulness seemed to come naturally to him. It was only at night when the girl had gone to her tent and he stood over the fire drying her furs that he let his thoughts take their own course. They were always of her.

The natives were wont to gather close about the fire outside the two tents. Raynor could see that they had come to regard the girl with a sort of reverence that was tantamount to adoration. Her fine courage, her supple strength, the fortitude with which she smiled away the tortuous trail, impressed them.

At first he had feared for her when the natives caught sight of her beauty and her femininity. That had passed now. They seemed to look upon her as a sort of goddess, at whose feet they laid not only their best effort but their reverence.

Through a pass in the mountains they fought their way one afternoon just as night rushed down upon them. In the lee of a cliff Raynor selected a camp site. Far below them, nestled upon the snow like a pale sapphire, stretched a tiny lake.

"Lake Howland!" Tad Raynor cried in delight, and the girl went to his side and caught his arm again, and together they stood looking down upon the frozen water. "It must be Lake Howland, Barb!" Raynor continued.

"You remember we figured our position

last night and knew that we must be within striking distance."

The girl nodded, smiled through her parka, and squeezed his arm enthusiastically. "It must be," she agreed. "I'm glad, Tad—very glad. If that is Lake Howland, then it also is the Barb claim."

"Of course! It is wonderful to realize that we are here. I had come to think, I guess, that all our lives would be spent pounding over the snow toward something that just wasn't to come!" He laughed boyishly.

"Would that have been so terrible, Tad?" she asked demurely.

Once again he felt that feeling of awkward self-consciousness. He wished devoutly that Barb would not say such things. They went deep with him, deeper than she knew.

The natives fell to jabbering in their own tongue. They had sensed that the end of their quest lay before them. Raynor ordered the tents pitched, and the usual arrangements for camping made, but he asked that the coffee be boiled in the lee of the cliff where the fire would be less apt to attract attention from any one at the claim.

"After we have had supper, Barb," he said tersely, "I'm going to run down there to the lake and look about a mite. I believe that some one is there at the claim. The best thing to do is find out before they see us, if that is possible."

Camp was pitched, and in every move there was a tensivity that had not marked the travelers hitherto. They ate in silence because each felt tremendously impelled to words and feared the utterance of them because of the torrent that might thus be released. It was no time for excitement.

"We have traversed a long way and a hard one for this moment," Raynor suggested. "We don't want to make any mistakes now."

"We shall not," Barbara said confidently. "You are not the kind to do that, Tad—you are like your father!"

At that he laughed deprecatingly, but his face glowed with happiness, and the girl knew that she had pleased him a lot. After the meal Tad did not light his pipe. He was too anxious for the start to enjoy a

smoke. He talked at some length with the natives, and instructed them fully and carefully as to their course.

Then he turned to the girl as he adjusted his parka again.

"I'll be no longer than need be, Barb," he promised. "You will be more than safe here; there is nothing to fear. When I return I hope I'll have some real news."

"I have no fear, Tad," she laughed easily. Then her hands set about adjusting her own parka, and he paused and looked down upon her in surprise.

In a matter of fact way she said: "I'm going with you, of course. I did not travel all this distance just to sit by when the first rightful foot treads upon the claim that cost my father his life."

"But, Barb, this is only a little trip to sound out things. There is no sense—"

"In trying to keep me from going," the girl laughed frankly, her nimble fingers pulling the parka close about her face. "I just won't talk about it, Tad. I'm going!"

He shrugged his heavy shoulders and waved one hand in a sort of helpless gesture which told her quite clearly that, while he had no approval of her plan he would not insist upon opposing it. Thus the two, rifles in hand, started down the steep slope toward the little sheet of ice that beckoned to them with a strange and powerful call.

Their course lay over places that were precipitous as well as dangerously slippery. Time and time again Tad Raynor negotiated a rocky declivity only by use of the most exacting care, and each time he turned to aid the girl downward he found her practically at his side.

The lake lay in a basin, such a basin as might once have been the crater of a volcano. About its shores there was a flat beach that sloped gradually upward to the mountains that surround it.

"It is wonderful," Barb Howland said softly. "Think of father alone in this vast waste and discovering this tiny little place on top of the world, Tad! He has worked in this spot—dreamed of the happiness and wealth that would be mine because of his sacrifice and courage. He even named the place for me!"

At that moment Tad Raynor found the

strength and inspiration to slip his arm about the girl's shoulders once more. She did not object. She seemed, in fact, oblivious of his presence. The tiny lake held a hallowed charm for her, and she seemed totally immersed in the thoughts which it inspired.

They circled the little spot watchfully. Not a sound reached their ears beyond the distant howl of a wolf; not a thing moved within their vision. Yet there was an eerie presence that both seemed to feel.

"Somebody is here, Barb," Raynor whispered as they halted beside a rock. "I haven't seen or heard a thing, but I'd swear that some one is here—mebbe even watching us this second."

"I have the same feeling, Tad," she admitted, a nervous laugh in her words. "Perhaps it's just the nervous reaction of the end of our quest—or maybe it's a weird sense of contiguity that is the gift of this silent country."

They stood thus a long moment, their ears filled with the whispering of the pines and the strange sounds that shifting snow and cracking rocks offer. Then Raynor shook himself as though fighting off the eerie feeling that gripped him.

"According to the maps, Barb," he said softly, "we should circle the lake to the south, pass through an opening in the rocks, and walk about a hundred yards into a basinlike hollow. There lies the strike that your father proclaimed the greatest of all time.

"Perhaps we had better explore a little under cover of night. The pass should lie a few hundred yards ahead."

Without answering, Barbara Howland caught his arm, and they started through the gray gloom, the great trees about them standing out for several feet upward along their trunks as the snow and ice made a background for them.

They found the pass in the rocks without difficulty, but each was quite ready to admit to the other that the strange feeling of espionage had increased as they walked, that each was certain some strange eyes were following their every move and waiting until the proper time to strike.

"Lord, Barb!" Raynor whispered husk-

ily as they paused by mutual consent. "I wish you weren't here!"

She did not answer, but her grip upon his arm tightened, and they both continued their peering through the gloom of gray night at the rocks ahead. About the rocks the shadows were deep and impenetrable.

"If some one is guarding the claim, that's where he would wait," Raynor remarked. "I'm not going to let something I can't even see keep me from finding out. Will you please wait here, Barb?"

"I will not! Wherever you go, I'm going—and that's going to be through those rocks, too."

In determination she started forward alone, and Raynor caught her and thrust her behind him. His rifle flashed across his chest to be gripped, ready for action, in both hands.

The girl laughed a little tensely, and followed as he began a slow and watchful march toward the rocks.

Scarcely had they started when movement came. A shadow darker than the others separated itself, flashed in silhouette across the snow, and Raynor raised his rifle.

Then a broken voice came to them, a voice of infinite pleading and staggering terror.

From the rocks crept a bundled form, arms outstretched as an evidence of peaceful intent, pace darting and slinking. The two stopped short, tense and ready as the figure approached them.

"Devil Mountain!" the bundled man wailed softly. "Damn Devil Mountain!" His voice held no threat, but that of supplication; his words were a plea to them to take him from the little sapphire lake, and the cold, calm, quiet of the mountains among which it lay.

Then they saw that he was an Indian.

"No need to fear this poor devil," Raynor whispered to the girl. Then, after a brief second's thought: "Let's get him back a little and make him talk. I want to know what he means by this 'Devil Mountain.'"

On the edge of the little lake they huddled among the rocks, the Indian repeatedly casting backward glances in the

direction of the pass to the claim. In his broken English, punctuated by lapses of coherence through sheer agony of fear, Raynor drew from the man his story. It was a pitiable one.

He told of taking two men who had run away from a ship at Nome to his shack and keeping them there until the snows came. He spoke of maps they had for the finding of this very spot, and of their payment to him for guiding them across the snows.

Then he told of the killing of the one named Gatchell by the one called Jerk, and of the appearance of a man he called a devil. Graphically, his eyes dilated with terror, he told of the death of Jerk Rann at the hands of the wolf pack, and the delight of the mad giant French Pierre at his own handiwork.

Through it all Raynor and the girl listened in spellbound attention. The story of the native made everything clear to them, and identified, to their amazement, the body they had found upon the limb.

"At best," Raynor said solemnly, "this Jerk Rann could have paid no greater price for his evil."

"It is the way of such as he," Barbara Howland said frankly. "There seems to be a poetic god in this country; it is he whose influence we have felt all along, Tad."

Then the native went on, told of the way the mad giant had pressed him into service with a native who had guided him, and how the three had fought their way to this Devil Mountain where the wind whispered in the rocks and spoke never of good.

The second native, he said, had been killed because he tried to run away. The mad giant had struck him on the head with his mighty fist, and as the Indian lay prone upon the snow, had trampled upon him until breath came no longer, and the lone wolf howled understanding from the reaches of frost.

And now, said the Indian, he was alone with the mad giant, French Pierre. Many months had passed, he said, and he had given up hope of getting away. The mad giant kept all the rifles and the ammuni-

tion, and all day the native was made to dig the yellow stones from the frozen cliff, and at night for hours he must sit and watch the pass to warn the mad giant, should any one approach.

No one had ever come until now—and he could not warn the giant. He could not; he wanted them to fly while yet life was theirs, and to take him with them before the giant fell upon them and with his vast fingers tore them to bits and cast them upon the snows to the howl of the wolves.

Such was his amazing story, and scarcely had he finished telling it when the silence was broken by the most terrible laugh that Tad Raynor ever had heard. The sound rang through the frozen silence as might the sudden bursting of an acid cataract.

The native moaned in terror, clung to Raynor's sleeve, and pleaded for protection.

"Keecho! By damn!" sounded the awful voice. "French Pierre heem fin' Keecho plenty. Sacré! Heem break Keecho bones som' so Keecho no more run off!"

Then he laughed again, and as he laughed Raynor whispered to the Indian to go to the man and to keep silent, and on the morrow he would return and surprise the mad giant and take Keecho away.

They watched as the native ran toward the pass, heard him answer that he was but chasing a rabbit for Pierre. Then in the dim shadows they caught sight of the giant and saw him seize the native and throw him to the snow, where he lay while the huge man kicked him into silence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

JUSTICE.

THE morning dawned gray and cold, and from the little camp on the mountain Tad Raynor peered down upon the lake where lay the entrance to the Barb claim. What would that day bring forth? Would it be possible for him to meet and conquer the mad giant that presided over the claim?

Would the native he had seen the night before find the courage to keep his silence

that a surprise attack might avail? Only time could tell, time and the storming of the pass through which he must go to win the claim and the justice that he sought for Barbara Howland!

Once again he pleaded with the girl to let him go alone. Once again she refused point blank, and left him no alternative but to take her. She asked also that some of the natives be taken, but in this Raynor won his way.

"They are superstitious, Barb," he said. "Once let that poor devil of an Indian shout something about Devil Mountain and they would become crazed. Either they would flee—or, worse, fight for that French Pierre, thinking he really was a devil!"

"In which," the girl said positively, "they might be quite right. Any man with such a laugh as tore the silence last night, Tad, is mad enough to pass for a devil any time!"

"We will find him quite human, Barb!" Raynor said ominously. "I mean to conquer or kill him!"

He watched the girl narrowly as he spoke, but could detect no sign of horror in her face. In fact, she remained quite calm, and said: "Of course, you will kill him if need be, Tad; either you or I will!"

"You, Barb! Good Lord! You cannot go into the presence of that mad thing child!"

"Pack up and let's start, Tad; I'll show you how much fear I have of such as he! Do you think I would have hesitated to kill that Jerk thing when he entered my room and stole these plans?"

"Not for an instant, had I been possessed of firearms! No more will I hesitate to kill this man who robs me here—and robs the work of my father!"

In silence they started down the precarious climb again. This time they knew their way and did better. The light of day had come, such as it was, and aided them. They gained the shore of the lake and crept forward rapidly toward the pass.

There was none to say them no when they reached it. Tad led the way between the rocks and toward the basin beyond. What a natural pass it was, like an aisle to an empire!

Carpeted with ice and snow, hewn from solid rock with a grandeur that only nature could achieve, entrance to a throne, it might have been, a throne of reward.

They gained the far end of the pass, and paused to gaze downward into the basin that sloped gently away from them. On the south side of the hollow there was a crude log cabin.

Before it stood the native they had seen the night before, and at sight of them he raised his arms in thanksgiving and made some sound which Raynor condemned with a sudden ejaculation.

Their chance of a surprise attack vanished with that idiotic welcome. The native whirled and ran toward them, his voice raised in babbling welcome. From behind the cabin appeared the form of French Pierre and he stood quite still for a moment, his hands outspread in surprise at the sight that greeted his eyes.

Then he bellowed his wild laugh again, and started directly toward them at a keen run. Tad Raynor set himself to meet the charge. He saw that Pierre was unarmed except for his mighty fists. As the great Frenchman drew nearer Raynor caught the light of mania in his eyes.

He raised his own weapon and pointed it full upon Pierre's breast.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Only the wild laugh sounded, and Tad Raynor half turned to the girl. "Mad!" he said in hollow tone. "Mad as the March wind. I can't just—murder him!"

The native had gained the pass and was crouched there now, behind the two, his babblings still pouring forth, his fear almost as insane as the wild rush of the giant maniac who derisively laughed away the menace of blazing death.

On the impulse, Raynor twisted his gun end for end and darted forward to meet Pierre's attack. The native shrieked a warning, and Barbara Howland called futilely to the younger man to come back. But Raynor went on.

He met French Pierre just at the foot of the gentle slope. The Frenchman swung his mighty arms wide and lunged at Tad. The younger man avoided the charge and swung his rifle butt.

Pierre flung an arm upward and warded off the blow, though the crack of the wood against bone and flesh seemed to Barbara Howland to have crippled the man entirely.

But no. Instead, Tad Raynor's insecure grip on the barrel of the gun lost him his advantage. The weapon slipped through his mittens, and whirled into a cloud of snowdust ten feet from where Pierre stood. With a crazy shout, and no apparent effect from the crunching blow upon his arm, Pierre whirled to the attack.

Desperately Tad fought him. He was quicker than Pierre, and twice dodged attack the while he lashed out with his mittened fists. Strong as he was, powerful as were the blows he directed, they bounced from the charging Pierre's head and face much as though they had been cast against sheer rock.

Then the girl screamed in terror. Raynor slipped on the snow, and Pierre's great arm swept about his body. Raynor was lifted from his feet, struggling and kicking violently.

Pierre roared his delight at the turn of affairs, slowly raised the huge Raynor above his head at arm's length, then hurled him far off where he landed in a flurry of flying snow.

Before he could gain his feet Pierre was upon him. His great fist raised and thudded against Raynor's head. Tad fell again—lay still. Pierre regarded him a moment, then whirled and ran toward Barbara Howland.

The native behind her screamed in terror and ran out of the pass, but the girl stood her ground, a strange calm spreading over her set face and her eyes, terrorized, watching the still and prone form of Tad Raynor.

As Pierre swept toward her, his wild laugh waking the silences and his great and mighty arms flailing the air, he might well have been a devil, some creature immune to death and therefore fearless of it.

Steadily the girl raised her own weapon. "Stop!" she called. Pierre roared his delight. There was no second command. The girl had seen what this mad giant would do.

Her rifle roared its defiance, and French Pierre stumbled, one mighty hand slipping

into the snow as an expression of strange wonderment twisted his heavy face.

"I told you to stop!" Barbara Howland shouted at him, her rifle now lowered to her hip as she watched him. He looked exactly like a wounded bear. For a moment he steadied himself with that vast hand prodded into the snow, his other against his breast, the fingers gripping at his shirt.

Then he shouted again, bellowed a defiance that was half crazed laugh, and half hateful growl. With an effort he raised himself erect, a light of doubt and wonderment on his face. He coughed suddenly, then spat a streak of red across the snow.

"By damn!" he howled raucously, "French Pierre, heem keel. Heem not die! Sacré!"

He swayed on his feet, steadied himself, the blight of death already transfiguring his features; then, one hand still clutching at the rushing death in his chest, he stormed ahead, his laugh ringing out once more, his devil-like disregard of death as evident as ever.

Barbara Howland called again a warning, and again it was laughed aside as Pierre staggered on toward her. She raised her rifle calmly. The Frenchman made no effort to dodge. His one arm reached out to grip her, as though his eyes might have deceived him in the distance he was from her.

Again the rifle roared. French Pierre cursed, straightened, fell toppling backward to the snow, where he writhed in a vain effort to get up. Slowly the girl went toward him, stood at his side as his huge arms went limp, and a weird smile set upon his mad face.

"Pierre heem get keel!" the man was muttering, as though telling to himself a most surprising piece of news that none might believe. "Sacré! Jes' like damn Jerk. Pierre he ees keel. Heem right queeck be dead, by damn!"

Barbara Howland stood over him but long enough to assure herself that he was harmless. Then she rushed to Tad Raynor's side, and found him just regaining consciousness and struggling to rise. She

aided him, steadied him as he stood up, his head spinning from the effects of Pierre's boot.

A shriek came from the pass. They turned and saw the native whirling down the slope toward the still Pierre. Barb shuddered as the Indian fell upon the dead man and pounded his carcass with shouts of mad joy. Raynor staggered toward him, pulled him away with a shudder.

French Pierre lay huddled in death, his shroud the snows that had been unable to defeat him, his strange eyes gazing upward at the calm heavens that had seen his evil deeds. The mighty muscles were as dust; all again was silent.

"Surely," Barb Howland said tenderly when Tad returned to her. "Surely, Tad, there is a god of these hills and these snows and his justice is unfailing!"

CHAPTER XXV.

CONTENTMENT.

THE office of Colonel Raynor in San Francisco was closed. Those who sought audience with the famous colonel were told that he was unavailable until later in the day unless it might be that he could be located on the wharves.

To those of them who sought him, there appeared a packet well inside the gate and warping toward its mooring where tenders already were in waiting. In one of those tenders was Colonel Raynor, most impatient of all who awaited the landing of the packet.

In the bow of the ship was Tad Raynor and, clinging to his arm, was Barbara Howland. The colonel clambered over the side and rushed toward them.

His arm slipped about the shoulders of Tad and he folded him close to his chest. Barbara slipped inside the other arm, and the colonel leaned down and kissed her cheek with a resounding welcome.

They all laughed joyously; then the colonel pushed Tad from him and surveyed him appraisingly. What he saw seemed to please him.

"Jerk Rann is dead, dad," the son said. "Died the worst death I ever heard of!

Pierre, too—he's dead!" As he spoke Tad Raynor glanced at the girl admiringly. "The biggest and worst man that ever sailed the sea or trod the snows, dad, was killed by the smallest and prettiest and best woman on earth!"

That evening in the Raynor home the colonel heard the detailed story. He saw with his own eyes enough clear yellow gold to make them all independent for ten lifetimes.

When the tale was done Tad rose and slipped his arms about Barbara. She raised her face to his and their lips met. The colonel rose to his feet and blessed them heartily.

"East and West are joined!" he smiled sagely. "You both are right lucky! Barb, your name is already famous, and you've lived up to it.

"I never saw a man with a better son than mine. I'll never see one with a better daughter. I'm as happy as you both are—where are you going to live?"

"Out here!" Barbara Howland said instantly. "Out here where I can find my father's remains and give to them the burial they deserve. Here in this new land where all things have come to me; here is where we shall live."

Tad nodded happily. "You bet, dad! I'll try to carry on for you. We're getting married to-morrow, too!"

"Yes, to-morrow," Barb said shyly, "and just as soon as we can we are starting East—Tad is such a baby, daddy! He can't wait to see the Hudson and ride on the steamboats that run to Albany—but he'll be frightfully sick of these stuffy trains before we get there!"

Outside a new San Francisco muttered its heterogeneous sounds like groans from the growing pains of a baby behemoth. In the room Barbara Howland slipped into her lover's arms and looked upward into his eyes as he kissed her.

Thus grew bliss and future promise from an evil panorama.

THE END



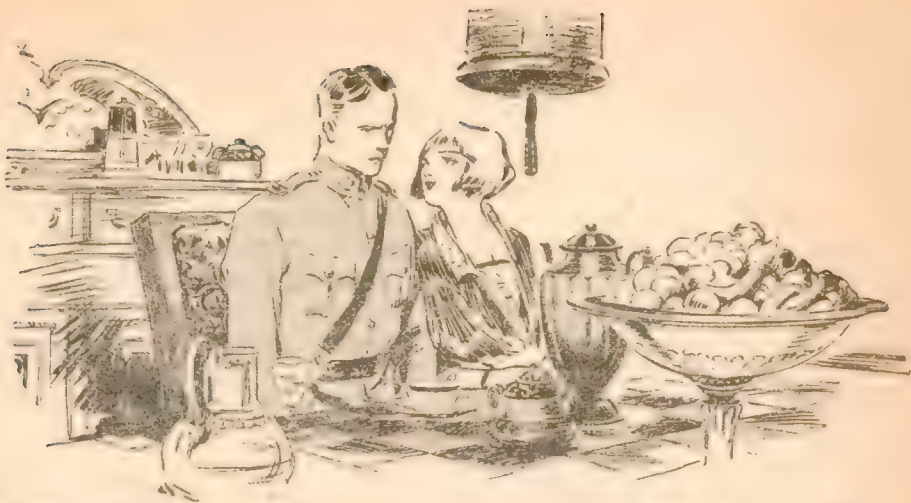
BABY

I DID not know what rapture was,
Until I saw him smile,
A little smile, so small, so fleet,
So full of winning guile—
But all of earth's repletest joy
Was in that tiny smile.

I did not know what torture was,
Until I heard him cry—
An awful cry that smote my heart
And made my lips go dry.
For all of earth's intensest pain
Was in that little cry.

I did not know what life could be
Until his life became
A part of me, the whole of me,
Until we were the same.
For in him all my dearest dreams
Reality became.

Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.



The Harder Right

By BEATRICE ASHTON VANDEGRIFT

SECOND LIEUTENANT JAMES L. PICKERING hadn't been on the post more than twenty-four hours when the colonel asked him to dinner.

This both surprised and flattered Jim. He didn't know whether it was merely a customary convention or a marked compliment, it being Jim's first post and first colonel. Certainly, none of the colonels at West Point had ever bothered about him. But now that he was a full-fledged second lieutenant, his status was, of course, different.

He had called on the colonel the evening before, as is the custom throughout the army, and had found him sincerely pleasant, if a trifle absent-minded.

His wife, though, had been extremely cordial, asking him about his home, mother and sisters and if he wasn't lonely being a bachelor.

On the way out he had met a young girl just coming in and carelessly tossing a fluffy scarf on the hat rack. She was probably a daughter, niece, cousin or other relative of the colonel.

The next morning being Saturday, the regiment was in the throes of an inspection, and Pickering had looked up from a minute scrutiny of a spotless rifle in the hands of one of his corporals to find the old man himself standing over him.

He drew himself up and snapped out a salute, the neatest he had given since the one he had rendered the Assistant Secretary of War who had presented him with his diploma the preceding June.

"How are you coming, Pickering?" the colonel had inquired in a brisk, official voice. "Have that man keep his eyes to the front. Your platoon needs discipline, Pickering, discipline."

His voice suddenly changed. It became lower, hesitant, a trifle embarrassed.

"We would like very much to have you dine with us this evening, Pickering," he said. "At eight." And he had passed on to find fault with the captain.

Pickering hadn't got over it yet. In one hour he was to dine with the colonel of his regiment!

He snapped the polishing cloth through

the buckle of his Sam Browne belt in a final flick and eyed the effect critically. The belt itself shone dark, glossily russet as only cordovan can. The buckle had the proper dull gold gleam.

His boots reflected the electric light like two tall dark mirrors. His uniform was newly cleaned and pressed, but he sniffed it anxiously. There was a slight lingering hint of gasoline about it.

He effaced the odor with a well known preparation which is supposed to kill everything from onions to dandruff.

Across the hall, through the open door, he glimpsed the slim but slightly mature figure of "Red" Paige who had been a first classman at the Point when Jim was a plebe and had often "heaved" Jim's neck back. Jim had been slightly bitter at the time, but now he liked Red. He was a darn good fellow out in the army.

Red was in the act of getting a half Nelson on the elusive bow-tie to his new Tuxedo that he was going to try out on an engagement in town that evening.

"The man that invented bow-ties," philosophized Red amiably, "should have been hung with 'em, Pickering."

"You're right, Red," agreed Jim. "That's why I'm wearing a uniform."

"Bet you're going to the colonel's for dinner," surmised Red carelessly, studying himself in the mirror.

Jim flushed. He hadn't meant to tell the boys about the colonel's invitation. He didn't think it would be tactful.

They might think he was trying to high-hat them of that the colonel was playing favorites.

"Why?" asked Jim, startled. "Is it customary?"

Red laughed a trifle shortly and said no more than, "Oh, no—not exactly," picked up his hat, a dark overcoat and turned out his light. "Good night, Pick!" he called, as an afterthought, from the first landing. "Have a nice time."

There was something about his tones that Jim didn't exactly like, but he forgot about both Red and his puzzling innuendoes in the excitement of his first official dinner. How was one expected to address one's colonel in the intimacy of his private dining

room? Should one be talkative, gay, non-chalant, or grave, silent, respectful?

The problem automatically solved itself. The colonel greeted him with, "Oh, good evening, Pickering. Come in," made a few desultory remarks anent the slipperiness of the veal roast at dinner, and afterward took to a volume on military history in a remote corner of the living room.

It was Mrs. Blodgett who kept the conversational ball revolving, with occasional interspersions from her daughter Daphne, the girl Pickering had glimpsed in the hall the evening before.

Daphne was about twenty, blondly pretty in a careful way, with veiledly eager blue eyes which she was accustomed to drop modestly at her mother's fond allusions to her youth, cleverness, good looks and popularity.

Jim listened with polite attention to everything Mrs. Blodgett had to say—how the army was going to the dogs, how even colonels could no longer afford fresh fruit, much less real cream, for breakfast—how worried she, Mrs. Blodgett, was at having Daphne here on the post where there were so many attractive young bachelors—and how much Daphne enjoyed going horseback riding if she had some one competent with her who really knew horses.

Mr. Pickering must have had marvelous experience with horses at West Point, but then, they taught young men everything there. You had to be terribly clever to graduate at all. Many didn't. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, though, of course, he was clever enough in his way.

Jim enjoyed the dinner immensely. He liked the roast with its thick brown gravy, the creamy mashed potatoes, the stuffed tomatoes like his mother used to bake, the rich butterscotch meringue pie. He liked Mrs. Blodgett, too, though she seemed a little intense about everything, and he thought Daphne quite pretty.

It was the first home dinner he had had in a long while, since he had left his own mother's plain but toothsome table, and it was the first homey evening he had spent in weeks in a room with a piano in it and a fireplace and cozy reading lamps scattered about.

He liked the colonel, too, for making himself a negligible factor in the evening's entertainment. There was no embarrassment about how to conduct himself with him.

Nice people, these were, glowed Jim. Real folks.

Daphne took him to the door and made an engagement to go horseback riding the next afternoon if Jim could get free from duty, and "daddy" would see to that, Daphne had promised.

What would the other fellows say—out riding with the colonel's daughter! Some style, eh? He must be careful not to be high-hat.

He went up to his allotted two rooms in fine feather, scarcely noticing the atrocious curtains deserted by the previous occupant. Cretonne, they were, with purplish brown "blue" jays perched on magenta-hued branches against a gaudy yellow background. They had been put there by a young officer who, through some perverted idea, had thought to make these barracks a real home.

He had picked out the material himself, hired the wife of the colored janitor to stitch it up for him, had spent two Sunday afternoons putting the curtains up, had made tiers of shelves in the corner for his books and had even bought some varnish for the floors, after a vain pleading with the quartermaster for shellac, gratis.

Three days after establishing himself in his "real home," the unfortunate young officer had been ordered to the Philippines, and Jim fell heir to his arty efforts.

Jim sighed, undressed as quickly as possible, and relegated the pernicious curtains to darkness, finally falling asleep to dream of the well ordered home and tasty dinner of his colonel. That the daughter did not appear in Jim's dream is interesting but not important.

II.

THE next day Jim went riding with the colonel's daughter, as per appointment, and that evening he had dinner again with the colonel. The colonel continued to be very affable, if a little remote, and his wife and Daphne were charming, intensely so.

They fussed over him in much the same way that Jim's own mother and sisters had always fussed, and Jim Pickering enjoyed it.

It became quite the accepted thing for Jim to dine now and then at the colonel's, to be frequently asked to drop in at the colonel's for a bit of afternoon tea, to have Mrs. Blodgett pour the tea at exactly the right strength and to have Daphne sweeten it for him.

It was all so cozy and nice, and so much like home, that Jim scarcely troubled to think much about it. If he had, he might have discovered that he was becoming very much indebted to the colonel's hospitality.

Daphne took Jim to all the hops in her car. She danced with him a great deal, and let him hold her compact and handkerchief when she danced with other men, which was becoming rarer.

In fact, Daphne was beginning not to care whether she danced at all, much preferring a secluded nook on the Polo Club's porch with Jim at her side and a moon in the heavens.

And if Jim somehow failed to respond to her veiled hints for romance, it was not his fault. It may have been the aftereffects of the colonel's heavy dinners, or it may have been that romance simply was not in Jim.

But in Daphne's blue eyes he noticed a new, glittering hardness—a feverish look of eternal seeking. Or perhaps it wasn't new. It may have been there from the first.

Daphne was always so eager, so intense. She *would* have her way.

Once, as Jim was washing up after a hard day's drill, he was startled by the insistent hoot of a horn beneath his window. It was Daphne in her buff roadster.

The horn shrieked again, and was answered by a burst of guffaws from the room across the hall. Red and some of the other bachelor officers had noticed the fair lady's serenading.

What could he do? He couldn't run down dressed as he was, and he couldn't call out to her. Women weren't supposed to hang

around the bachelors' barracks anyhow. It was horrible of Daphne.

Somehow he managed to dress and rush down at last to stop the clamor of that deadly horn. He settled himself beside Daphne and did not draw full breath until they had reached the chaperonage of the main road.

"Daphne, what in the world did you do that for?" he began surlily. "You know darn well women aren't supposed to come over to our quarters."

"Who's going to stop me?" asked Daphne blithely and with some conceit. "There are only three officers on the post who outrank daddy, and they're all his friends anyhow. I guess I can do what I want."

"Well, you certainly made me a laughing-stock to those men," snapped Jim.

Daphne flushed.

"What of it?" she scorned with a curious hint of bitterness. "They're nothing but a bunch of women haters anyhow. I wouldn't have anything to do with 'em on a bet."

Jim subsided, a little startled at the hard look that came into her eyes.

"Where are you taking me now?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," smiled Daphne, alluringly gay again. "We are going to the Brightons' for dinner. You know Hugh Brighton, don't you? Isn't he in your battalion? Well, he has quite a cute wife, you know, and a darling little boy, and they live in one of those terrible shacks. But it's really quite nice and shows what a second lieutenant can do on his pay, even if he's married," she added with a sidewise glance that Jim missed.

Jim did know Hugh Brighton and liked him, but he would rather have got the dinner invitation direct. It almost seemed as though Daphne were arranging his whole life for him.

III.

DADE BRIGHTON met her two guests at the door, Hugh Junior tucked cozily against her shoulder.

Daphne at once went into transports of rapture.

"Isn't he cute, Jim? Oh, isn't he darling? Dade, you have such a cunning baby! Oh, look at him smile! Dade, do let Jim hold him a minute. He'd love to."

Jim backed away. He liked babies, but somehow they embarrassed him. They were such little, alien things with a divine aura about them which forbade the sacrilege of awkward masculine hands. Raving over babies in public came as easy to Jim as saying his prayers there.

But Mrs. Brighton was holding out the pudgy mite to him, and he had to take it, terror-stricken lest he drop it or disarrange its compactness.

"Oh!" gushed Daphne in hushed wonder. "Isn't Jim sweet with him, Dade? Why, he seems to know just what to do."

Somehow or other this rankled Jim. He hated Daphne saying things like that. In fact, the whole evening angered him, in spite of the Brightons' gay hospitality.

Why did Daphne appear so interested in housekeeping? Why was she alarmed over the high price of eggs in the fall and the scarcity of colored help in the spring?

"Though I *could* do my own work, if I had to," she added to Dade.

Yes, the whole spectacle of the Brightons' married happiness irritated Jim unaccountably. Not that he begrudged the Brightons their happiness, but he disliked the way Daphne was pointing it out to him. He was beginning to feel pushed, somehow, crowded.

Mrs. Blodgett, too, was assuming a new, disturbing manner. She seemed over-motherly to Jim. Jim had liked it at first, but now it strangely alarmed him. Only the colonel maintained his air of disinterested, though polite, detachment.

Yet, the colonel's dinners continued to be excellent, his living room cozy, and his reading lamps as comfortable as ever. So Jim kept on going there at his insistence, until something happened that waked Jim up and made him realize the birds were singing, love birds.

The "something" was his kissing of Daphne.

He hadn't meant to do it. It simply did itself. It was at her door, or rather the colonel's, when Jim was saying good

night after an exceptionally fine dinner of baked ham and golden yams.

Daphne alone had seen him to the door, Mrs. Blodgett taking leave of him in the living room and shooing the couple off to the privacy of the vestibule with a queerly knowing smile.

Jim accepted an invitation to come again the next evening and bring his precious "Howitzer," the West Point year book. Daphne so wanted to see what life was like there as they might be going there some day.

She said this with her head very near Jim's and her lips accessible. The first thing he knew they were on his and he had kissed her, through no will of his own.

No thrills played tag down Jim's spine. He got away from the kiss as soon as he could.

"I'm sorry, Daphne," he murmured. "I didn't mean to do that."

"Why, that's all right," came her voice, close to him in the dark. "I don't mind, Jim."

Pickering bolted and ran. All night he went over that kiss in his mind and tried to analyze it.

Was it pleasant? Had it given him a thrill? Was it necessary? Why had it happened at all?

Toward morning he went to sleep and woke two hours later with the roll of reveille in his reluctant ears.

No one happened to see him enter his company's orderly room that morning, as he was a little early, least of all the company clerk and the top sergeant who were conversing earnestly on the other side of the thin partition.

"I know it, sergeant," came the nasal tones of the clerk. "I know that us enlisted men ain't supposed to criticize officers. And I *ain't* criticizing him, sergeant—honest. For Lieutenant Pickering is a mighty fine officer and gentleman. But I'm certainly hoping as how he gets away from the entanglements he's in. That Miss Daffy and the missus certainly is hum-dingers. It ain't the colonel's fault, no more'n Lieutenant Pickering's. Them two men is just helpless. But I certainly hope he breaks away, sergeant, now, don't you?"

"I certainly hope you shut your mouth and type them new orders," snapped the sergeant, though his tones were not unsympathetic. But he thought he had heard footsteps on the other side of the wall, and a good sergeant takes no chances.

Pickering flushed, and something hot crept along his spine. Even the men in his company were gossiping about him!

What was the idea? He'd find out from Red or some of the other fellows who had been acting so mysteriously ever since he had hit the post, though they seemed to like him well enough.

He found opportunity just before supper as he was opening his locker to get out the "Howitzer" for Daphne's perusal that evening. Red had come in to borrow some shoe polish.

"Red," began Jim abruptly, "you were acting mighty wise and mysterious that first day when I went to the colonel's for dinner. You seemed to know a lot. What's it all about anyway?"

Red calmly lit a cigarette and slowly blew a long cloud of smoke from his lips.

"Nothing, old man," he answered, embarrassedly. "At least, nothing that we could tell you. We thought you'd find out for yourself."

"Find out what?" queried Jim.

"Oh, the lay of the land," said Red carelessly, making an idle smoke ring. "We all had to go through the same thing—every darn bachelor that's come to this post. They rushed us just like they did you, but we got on to it and broke away in time. We thought you'd wise up and do the same, but when you kept on going, why, we supposed you were in love with the girl. Anyhow, it was none of our business."

Jim flushed.

"I didn't know—it was like that," he said at last, slowly.

Red crunched out his cigarette and resumed, with eyes averted: "We couldn't very well tell you, old chap. There are some things you can't discuss, you know, and your colonel's daughter is one of them.

"Daphne! Perhaps you've heard her nickname around here and perhaps you haven't. It's 'Daffy' and you can draw

your own conclusions. Thank you for the loan of the polish, Pick. I'll pay you back at the end of the month. So long. I'm tooting to town."

Daphne! She had rushed every one of them—every bachelor on the post! It wasn't the colonel who was inviting them to dinner. He was just his daughter's mouthpiece.

Daffy! Man-daffy, and everybody knew it and had been silently pitying Jim and perhaps censoring him.

One moment he felt like fighting them all—Red and the company clerk and the other gossips who couldn't mind their own business. The next moment a sickening reaction seized him and he realized that it was he who had been the fool.

Unless, as Red had so charitably surmised, he *was* in love with the girl. Was he? He didn't know.

It was a reluctant and puzzled Jim who appeared at the colonel's door that evening with his "Howitzer" under his arm.

Daphne herself let him in. She wore pale peach organdie and about her there lurked the mysterious scent of some intriguing perfume.

From another room in the depths of the house came the rather high voice of Mrs. Blodgett, telling the colonel to take his neckties off her nice new bureau scarf. The colonel's comments on this were not audible.

"Oh, you've brought the 'Howitzer!'" exclaimed Daphne, much pleased. "Come over and sit on the sofa and show it to me. I'm dying to see all those cunning cadets and especially you, Jim. I want to see you in your basketball outfit, the time you beat the navy."

Jim settled himself on the sofa beside her, defensively stiff. Daphne switched on the rosy floor lamp at her elbow and curled one foot under her with a luxurious sigh, peeping at the pages over Pickering's shoulder.

She exclaimed with admiration at the various pictures of Flirtation Walk, the imposing gray chapel on the hill, the grim beauty of the riding hall with its fluted buttresses looking almost a part of the high river bank.

"Jim," she said softly, "we're going there some day, aren't we?"

Pickering lifted his head, startled. Daphne's large blue eyes were on him, and in them he read impending surrender. Daphne was in love with him—at least, she would marry him.

Confused, Jim sought refuge in a new page, pointing out to Daphne the pictures of the handsomest men in his class and describing their virtues frantically.

He had to think, and think fast. Daphne would marry him. The colonel and his wife, particularly his wife, would let her. Would their marriage be a good thing? It would, probably.

Having the colonel for a father-in-law would make things pleasant for him in the army. And Daphne wasn't such a bad looker. Besides, how could he get out of it? They all expected him to marry her. Gosh, but he was in deep, and all because of an innocent delight in the colonel's invitations to dinner.

Yes, he supposed he would have to marry Daphne. He didn't love her. He knew that now, absolutely. But how could he get out of it without ruining his career? Second lieutenants can't turn down their colonels' daughters with impunity.

He'd just better let things take their course—just slide into this marriage without resistance or effort on his part.

He thought with a romantic pang of his dreams of the girl that might have been—his own little femme that he would some day find and love. That she was still in the world waiting for him he didn't doubt. But she would have to wait in vain.

Daphne was leaning nearer to him. Perhaps she sensed this sudden weakness in him and meant to take immediate advantage of it.

"Oh, Jim," she breathed, "don't be afraid to speak. I know you're poor, but lots of people live on second lieutenants' pay. And besides, daddy will keep on buying my clothes. Oh, Jim, I know you love me."

Jim took a last refuge in turning a final page before giving in to Daphne's soft insistence.

The page was meaningless to him for a

moment, then his wandering gaze focused sharply.

It was the Cadet Prayer, done in gray tones with gold capitals—the old familiar Cadet Prayer that he had repeated so fervently every Sunday in that high gray chapel on the hill.

He could hear the corps yet, intoning that prayer—the symbol of the cadet religion.

Snatches of it came back to him, though the printed page was a blur:

Strengthen and increase our admiration for honest dealing . . . Suffer not our hatred of hypocrisy and pretense ever to diminish . . . Make us to choose the harder right instead of the easier wrong.

The harder right!

Jim lifted his head and faced Daphne squarely.

"Oh, Jim, you do love me!" she was repeating.

Pickering eyed her keenly.

"No," he stated bluntly; "you're wrong. I don't."

A look of startled fury swept across her face.

"Any more than *you* love *me*," he went on ruthlessly. "You love my uniform, and any army officer is entitled to wear it."

Daphne's eyes narrowed and the look of melting surrender in them hardened to one of incredulous scorn.

"You're a fine one!" she told him. "Turning me down. Me!"

Her fury broke loose and she literally pushed him out of the house.

Jim walked the considerable distance back to his room, a sadder and a wiser man. The elating emotion of restored

self-respect that had buoyed him up during the ordeal was supplanted by a sickening fear.

He had scorned his colonel's daughter, and he would probably hear about it. At any rate, life in the regiment would be made unbearable for him, he thought.

He slept little that night, and was poorly prepared for the morrow's duties.

How could he face the colonel?

IV.

JIM was unwontedly touchy that morning, finding fault with men who had not an iota of dust on their rifles or flaw in their uniforms.

He saw the colonel going up and down in front of the companies ahead of him—the colonel looking grimmer than ever, with the ruthless silver eagle scowling from his shoulders.

At last the colonel approached Jim's platoon. Jim straightened and saluted, steeling himself to meet his superior officer's gaze.

But the eyes that were bent to his were confused, a little sad, and very mild, and the colonel's voice was unusually low. His gloved hand descended unobtrusively upon Jim's shoulder a moment.

"Pickering," said the colonel in an embarrassed whisper, "I'm mighty glad—about things. I'm glad you were able—to hold out—against 'em. *I* never was."

His voice became sharp again.

"Pickering," he boomed, "keep that man's eyes front! I've spoken to you about that before, and I'm not going to again."

"Yes, sir," answered Jim blithely, and saluted.

THE END



AMONG NEXT WEEK'S ATTRACTIONS

will be "Beyond the Car-Line," by Ben Conlon, a Complete Novelette, which involves its hero in a mesh of seemingly inextricable tangles; also "At Rifle's Point," by James W. Egan, as exciting as its title.



Copper is King

By H. A. WOODBURY

JIM BELL remembered the breathless speed with which he had loped home through the scrub oaks and 'manzanita to tell his father of the discovery which had thrown Cottonwood into an uproar. And he remembered likewise that it had been his father who had begun talking first—a few crisp and admirably succinct words on the care of horses.

"I'll put you back to ridin' old Baldy if you ever bring in that paint lookin' like this again." For horses were still a passion with the old man even though he had given up cattle ranching, to try his hand at the gentler task of fruit. They had brought water through flumes down from Sycamore Creek, and had transformed a sloping mountain valley into a peach orchard.

"But, dad," Jim had protested, "they've found copper the other side of town—mountains of it. The Southwestern Copper Company's coming in and they're going to build a mine as big as the Phelps-Dodge plant at Bisbee. Cottonwood's going to be a city!"

The old rancher's face had hardened.

"I'm sorry," he said.

His gray eyes stared out across the endless, rolling hills which climbed north into the cypress and pine, and ebbd away south into the mesquite and palo verdes of the gaudy desert.

"Sorry!" Jim had expostulated. "Why, dad, think what it means to us—a market right here for our peaches—and vegetables, too."

But the old man had continued to stare into space.

"Maybe," he said slowly.

And Jim had read in his eyes a little sadness at the inroads of civilization. For his father loved the great wilderness.

The first year seemed to bear out Jim's prophecy. The little, lazy town swarmed with hungry workmen. Prices went booming with land values.

It was no longer a question of a battle with the railroad agent for a refrigerator car. They sold all their peaches right in Cottonwood, and could have sold more.

Likewise, the second year, as the huge steel towers and sprawling network of buildings began to take definite form.

These were bright years for Jim and his father. The inscrutable hills seemed at last to have softened, to be anxious to return all the love and attention which Bell and his son had showered upon them through the uncertain and often ruinous past.

And then it was at the beginning of the third spring, when the mine had for the first time started operations, that the blow fell.

Jim's father came up to him one day.

"Notice anything wrong with the trees this year?" he asked.

Jim pursed his lips. Since that earlier period, his face had taken on surer, stronger lines. Enthusiasm remained, sparkling in his blue eyes, but it was an enthusiasm tempered by the keen, clear-witted judgment of a man.

Lean, angular, very tensely alive, he stood a little over six feet of bone and wiry sinew.

"Noticed they weren't leafing out quite so well," he replied. "But it seemed to me we had a longer winter."

His father shook his head. He pointed off to the south, where the bright hills fell away.

"It's the smelter," he said. "See those smokestacks?"

Jim nodded.

"Well," his father went on, "their tops, down there, are just about even with this little valley of ours. And the breeze is always this way. The smoke drifts up here where it can't get out of these cañons." He looked at his son earnestly as he added: "And there are sulphur fumes in that smoke. In a couple of years we won't have any orchard at all."

Jim gulped twice.

"Seems to me the mine ought to do something about it."

His father's expression did not alter.

"I've seen them," he said slowly, "and the superintendent tells me that it's just our tough luck." He went on, after a second: "But there was a lawyer out from town this morning. Said we had a good

case against the company, and that if I'd give him five hundred dollars he could see the thing through."

"How'd he find out?"

"Prob'ly heard me talkin' about it in the drug store. He's a new fellow—just came here from the East. Said it might be a little irregular, his coming and soliciting the case, but that he didn't know many people here and was anxious to get started. Figured if he won a suit against the Southwestern Copper Company it'd give him a reputation."

Jim nodded. "Nice fellow?"

"Well, I just talked to him, but he seemed clever. Allen Brown's his name."

"And you gave him the money?"

"I gave him half and told him I'd give him the rest when the suit came up in a couple of weeks!"

Jim grinned.

"Well, then, I guess he *is* clever." His face sobered. "Goin' to need me, this afternoon? Cause I told Red I'd haze for him in the bulldoggin' at the Parada if there wasn't much to do here."

His father answered his grin.

"Go right ahead. James Morton, president of Southwestern Copper, came in this mornin' in his private car. He's going to be guest of honor at the Parada. Maybe you'll meet the old reprobate."

II.

It was with a very sober heart that Jim started the trek to town. Ordinarily, the prospect of an afternoon in the saddle after weeks with pruning shears would have set his blood tingling.

To fork a horse, to feel the urge of sheer, brute power, quivering under him was a tonic of magic properties. It made him feel suddenly alive all over. Life crowded, throbbing, close to him. His pulse leaped to the very tips of his fingers.

But, to-day, in the face of the news he had just received, it was a little different.

Even so, his spirits revived partially as he rode out onto the field. The milling crowds, the bright colors, the blare of a brass band, the deep voice of Doc Pardee, announcing—all this took him captive.

And then he wondered a second whether his father was right—whether the real West had died when the mines and the irrigation and the cities came in, and whether to-day's pageant were simply make-believe.

He shook his head. The West lives. For no power on earth is or ever will be strong enough to subjugate these hills completely or to break their free spirit.

Jim gazed off across the field. The stands were jammed. For the West loves its rodeos, no matter how many it has seen. Furthermore, to-day, Morton's presence was an added drawing card.

Cottonwood was anxious to behold its master. Morton and his party sat in one of the front boxes.

Morton, the angel of Cottonwood! Jim's lips tightened in bitter irony.

But he had little time to reflect. The bulldogging followed closely on the heels of the steer tying.

Tensely, Jim took his place. He was, to be sure, to be no very active actor. His function as hazer was simply to ride one side of the steer while the bulldogger, Red, came up on the other side—to prevent the animal from veering sharply away just as the bulldogger made his flying leap from the saddle to the beast's horns.

In a moment, the gates of the chute flew open, and the steer came charging out. Then, as he darted over the white line, up ahead, the official at the chute dropped his flag.

Like two bright arrows, Red and Jim shot forward.

They came up on the animal in perfect coördination, timing their speed accurately to meet the steer's so that as the surprised animal slowed his pace abruptly, they did not ride beyond and temporarily lose him.

His heart pounding as if it were his own act, Jim watched Red reach a cautious hand out for the far horn. He clasped it; his other hand simultaneously reached the horn on the near side. In a flash, Red and the steer were in the dust, wrestling it out.

"Nice work, Red," Jim shouted.

But in a second, his heart stood still.

For Red's riderless horse, bucking and pitching now at every step, began charging

straight across the field for the grand stand. And Jim realized that there would be no stopping at the fence.

For as Red had slid off, the saddle had turned, coming now to rest under the horse's belly.

The animal was no longer a sensible cow pony, but a crazed, frenzied beast, striving by some inane system of horse logic to outrun this terrible, strange thing which beat beneath him. And Jim knew that a horse in that condition runs in a straight line—and that he stops at nothing.

There was a mad scramble in the stands as the animal approached.

Jim paused not a second. Giving his own mount the spurs, he was off in a flash, shaking out a noose as he rode. He gave the rope one twirl over his head, then tossed it out full length.

But at that moment the maddened horse made an unexpected burst of speed so that the noose fell short, catching the cayuse about the neck instead of about the front feet. He came to the end of the rope with a bang, and the hemp snapped like a piece of ticker tape.

Ahead of him, Jim beheld the crowd. And, to his horror, he saw directly in the path of the horse, in one of the front boxes, a man of about fifty working feverishly to loosen the foot of a young girl which was in some way caught in the boards.

Jim reined his horse sharply to one side, then back toward the crazed animal, so that he now approached the beast as nearly at right angles as he could. He dug in his spurs in a final, convulsive effort. He must, he must cut the horse off.

In an instant there was a terrific thud as the two animals collided, not three feet from the stands. For a moment the air was filled with flying hoofs and twisting necks.

But the collision had served its purpose. The cayuse did not crash through the fence.

Jim, however, felt himself catapulted high into the air. He lit with a sickening jar, sprawled out limply. He strove to jump to his feet. But instead, staggered back dizzily.

There had been a violent stab of pain in his leg as the horses had crashed. And

now he felt his head splitting. In a moment everything was black.

A few minutes later, he half opened his eyes to see an ever increasing circle of humanity crowding round him. Through a haze he saw just over him a young man and a young girl.

The man was very dapperly dressed, and the girl was very beautiful, with gentle blue eyes and soft, waving hair.

"Let's get out of this," the man was saying. "You don't want to get caught in all this vulgar jam."

The girl's voice protested. "He saved my life, and I'm not going to leave till I'm sure he's all right."

Darkness, once more.

A little later Jim saw her face again, bending close to his, as she ran her fingers over his forehead. He felt himself being bounced about. And he realized that he must be in an ambulance.

A thought came to him vaguely from very, very far off. What was it? Something about a ranch. Oh, yes, and smokestacks, giant brick towers belching out sulphur fumes. He seemed to smell the fumes now. And he had the sensation that his body had begun to wither—like the peach trees.

In subsequent days, he saw the girl's face frequently—and frequently he saw his father's. But he could not always understand what was being said to him. And usually he was unable to answer anyway.

The rest came back more clearly—that about the smokestacks. He remembered that he and his father were going to sue the copper company. And now his dad would have to battle it out, alone.

Nights, sometimes, he had wild nightmares of a giant snatching the ranch away from them, of his wandering with his father through a forest of dead trees.

His skull fractured and his leg broken, he lay for three weeks in the hospital before the veil which fogged his eyes lifted and the world about him assumed its old, natural shape again.

Then, one morning, when the girl came in, he was able to talk to her. And he learned that her name was Elizabeth Worth.

Her mild eyes grew softly blue.

"Oh, I'm so thankful you're going to be all right. There's nothing to worry over now but your leg, and it'll be well in two or three weeks."

Then as she chatted to him, there came a knock at the door.

"Come in," she called.

But the visitor did not come in. Instead, he called: "Going to stay in there all day? I've been waiting outside the hospital for half an hour."

The girl swiftly gathered up her vanity case and her purse.

"Sorry, but I guess I'll have to go. See you to-morrow, though. That's my—my fiancé."

As she vanished into the corridor, Jim beheld the silhouette of the same dapper young man who had been her companion on the day of the accident.

He gazed wanly at the white walls. For the girl seemed to take away with her every bit of sunshine.

He forced a smile. "Think of it—me—in bed!"

His eyes followed vainly after her. So she was engaged. Well, there'd be something wrong with a girl as pretty as that if she weren't. Only— He did not finish out the thought.

He began to wonder suddenly where she'd come from—how she'd happened to be in the box. And then it came over him that naturally she'd come West to visit her fiancé.

For he remembered rather vaguely having seen the dapper young man here and there in Cottonwood for a little over a month preceding the accident.

His thoughts abruptly abandoned the girl. For he realized with a start that there was something even more important he must find out about. His father's suit had by this time been heard and decided.

Then presently his father came, his bright eyes smiling.

"Well, son, I told 'em all along they couldn't kill a boy of Jack Bell's." He took a seat near the bed. "Just saw Brown coming out of here as I came in. What was he here for—to tell you the news?"

"Brown?" demanded Jim blankly.

"Sure, Allen Brown, my lawyer. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, yes, of course."

Jim smiled. So the girl's fiancé was his own lawyer. Mentally, he made the usual observation about its being a small world. Then, very seriously, he turned back to his father.

"By the way, dad, what is the news?"

But he scarcely needed to ask. For at his question, the old rancher could not conceal the pain in his eyes.

His voice grew husky. "The case came up, yesterday—and we lost."

For a long moment, the men exchanged mute, understanding glances.

Then, finally, Jim roused himself.

"Well, dad, soon's this leg's all right, reckon I can start cow punchin'."

His father nodded.

"And I'm not so old, myself." He drew himself up.

Tears sprang to Jim's eyes. And he reaffirmed his observation of the day of the Parada—that the West would never pass. Never, certainly, while there were men with the grit and determination of his father.

III.

THE girl came in the next day, as she had promised. And to Jim, in his present sadness, she was a radiant vision. For it occurred to him that with a girl like this for a pal, a man needn't care what fortune held in store.

Elizabeth Worth took his hand warmly.

"I'm afraid this'll have to be good-by," she said, her blue eyes smiling. "I'd hoped to be around in time to see you on your feet, but Allen's so impatient. Thinks we ought to go East right away and get married."

Jim grinned.

"Can't say that I blame him," he said frankly.

A quick flush mounted to Elizabeth's face.

"You see, I've put him off twice." She drew up a chair to sit alongside the bed. "Promise me, though, that you won't go into any more rodeos."

His lips puckered in amusement.

"Guess I won't have time for awhile. Got to get me a job as soon as I'm out of here. You see, dad and I had a nice little fruit ranch until that leech, James Morton, got his filthy hands on it."

"James Morton!" exclaimed the girl. "Why, do you know who he is?"

"Sure I know who he is," said Jim, his anger rising in spite of himself. "He's president of the Southwestern Copper Company, and the man who swindled us out of our ranch."

Elizabeth rose. "Swindle's rather a strong word."

"Well, it amounted to that; you see—" He saw suddenly that Elizabeth's eyes were blazing.

She stamped her foot

"James Morton's the soul of honor and justice. He never swindled anybody out of anything. He's—he's my uncle."

Without another word, she left the room, slamming the door as she went.

For a long second, Jim gazed after her, still uncomfortably conscious that in her anger she had been very beautiful.

Then, gradually, it came back to him—a man of about fifty trying to help her out of the way of the charging horse. The scene returned to him now, with details which had remained submerged in his sub-conscious memory.

He should have associated the girl with Morton before this. And he might have, had not her companionship with Allen Brown sent him off on the wrong track.

He stopped suddenly, his heart sinking. She—Morton's niece—was engaged to Allen Brown. And Allen Brown had been his father's lawyer! No wonder they'd lost the case.

No wonder Brown had come out to the ranch, soliciting their suit so eagerly. Little things which had jarred at the time, only to be passed over now returned in a devastating flood. He was able to merge all the variant cross-currents.

Morton had sent one of his own men out—his niece's fiancé, so that there could be no possibility of losing the law suit!

In other words, he and his father had never had a chance. They had been framed from the start.

And suddenly his bitterness against Morton rose until it choked. It was bad enough to lose the case in open court. But to lose it through treachery!

He gazed helplessly at his plaster cast.

The girl's words returned mockingly. "Morton's the soul of honor and justice."

Honor and justice! The words stung. Justice! "While I risked my life for him and his niece, he went on coolly plotting."

He gazed again about the white room which had suddenly become like a prison to him.

There was but one thing to do. He realized this and realized it with swift clairvoyance. That was to get hold of Brown immediately—before he had a chance to leave town, bring him back to the judge who had tried the case, and force a confession out of him.

In that event, there'd be sufficient basis for a new trial.

But he realized at the same time that it was a case which cried for speed. Once Brown got safely out of the State, evidence might seem too flimsy to have him brought back. Furthermore, Morton undoubtedly had political power in his own neighborhood so that extradition might prove doubly difficult.

He looked out the hospital window. About four thirty, judging by the sun. And Morton's private car would be hooked onto number three, due out at six.

Meantime, his father was out at the ranch where there was no telephone. And it was a good two hours and a half round trip by automobile.

Another thought returned and stung.

"And this damn leg that keeps me here, I broke saving him!"

This rancor, however, passed. For he realized that even had he been able to foresee all this, he would have behaved no differently the day of the Parada.

No, he had been amply repaid for the leg and the skull, both, by Elizabeth's deep, wordless gratitude when she ministered to him throughout the weeks when he had seen the world through a veil.

His heart rose, choking, to his throat.

It was Elizabeth's part which now hurt worst of all. Though it was entirely con-

ceivable that she knew nothing about all this.

In agony, his hands clenched the sides of his bed.

It was ghastly to be so helpless.

He sat up finally.

Then, cold perspiration springing to his temples as he moved in pain, he slipped his good leg over the side of the bed. It seemed curiously numb and lifeless as it touched the floor.

He sat there for a moment. Ring for a nurse? No, there'd be too much explaining. She'd make him stay while she sent for the sheriff. Then he'd have to go over it all again.

And he wasn't sure whether the sheriff would think his suspicions sufficiently strong. After all, Morton had done a lot for Cottonwood. The sheriff might very well hesitate, without better grounds, to lay hands on him.

No. Jim pounded his foot on the floor. Only one thing to do. He reached forward to grasp a chair. Then, steadying himself on this, he worked his way to the closet.

No clothes. Hospitals don't trust their patients. He grinned in spite of himself. But there was a bathrobe—and a pair of crutches awaiting his convalescence.

He slipped into the bathrobe. Then he turned to behold a pale scarecrow in the glass of the dresser.

Then, suddenly, he realized the impossibility of his present situation. Suppose he did make the street successfully and unseen? He wouldn't get two steps outside before he'd be sent back as insane or delirious.

But, as he stood there in contemplation, the door burst open. And he saw, framed in its portals, the huge, bulking form of Red.

Red grinned amiably.

"Been tryin' to see you every day, but this's the fust time they thought you was well enough to see anybody but that gal and yer dad."

Resting on his crutches, Jim stretched out his arms.

"Red, you're an angel from heaven."

Swiftly he explained the situation.

"Now, Red, get me this man, Brown,

Tell him I want to thank my lawyer before he leaves town. Tell him anything. But bring him here."

Red grinned. "Nothin' easier."

And he was off, his high-heeled boots clanking down the tiled corridor.

Then, breathlessly, Jim waited.

He saw the sun outside dip gradually lower over the hills as they changed in the dying light from orange to purple.

He heard, faintly, the toot of number three.

Seven o'clock came, and eight—

And then at about eight thirty, a nurse came to help him to the phone in the corridor.

"I tried to take the message," she apologized, "but he said it was very important and that he wouldn't speak to any one but you."

Eagerly, Jim placed the receiver to his ear.

"Howdy," came the voice at the other end, "this's Red. They got me down here in jail."

"In jail?" gasped Jim, his heart sinking.

"Yea, bo—kidnapin'. Your bozo wouldn't come along so I ambled uptown an' got some o' the boys an' we lassoed an' hog-tied him an' Morton both. Only before we could git 'em more'n a couple o' blocks, the girl'd called up the police, an' we run into the whole force—yeah, both of 'em, but they had guns. Reckon we orter've tied up the gal, too, but it didn't seem nice to do it to a lady."

"And Morton and Brown got away on the train, then?"

"Wal, Brown, he was ready to go, but Morton said they'd gotta stay an' make sure I got my ninety-nine years in Florence."

Jim heaved a sigh of relief.

He returned to his room to sleep restfully. But along toward morning, he awoke, the prey to fresh doubts.

Suppose Morton were really intent on sending Red up? From what he knew of the man, it was likely enough. And furthermore, if Morton could drag his father and himself into the mess, wouldn't it rather spoil the chances of the judge's believing their story?

His father came in toward nine the next morning.

And quickly, Jim went over all that had taken place.

His father nodded. His blue eyes grown very serious.

"But, Jim," he said, "do you realize what this may mean for Red—and for us, too? Assault and battery, if the judge is lenient, and something worse, if he isn't. I'll try to see Brown right away, and frighten the thing out of him."

The rancher returned in half an hour, his eyes even more serious.

"Well, son, we *are* in trouble now, I'm afraid. Morton's been just one too slick for us. Brown's nowhere to be found. Morton evidently sent him out of town on the eleven fifty, last night."

For a long second, they looked at each other.

Then Jim sat up, painfully.

"Dad," he commanded, "get me my clothes, and get me out of here. I can drag along on crutches out to the car. And I reckon I can stand a short ride if you're careful of the bumps. Here's where Morton's overplayed his hand. If we can show the judge that our witness skipped town just as we were looking for him, maybe the old boy 'll listen to us. Besides, we can make Morton explain just why Brown did leave."

His father took his hand. His eyes lit up.

"By golly, you're right. Brown's disappearance really helps us!"

They were off in about fifteen minutes, despite the protestations of the nurses, Jim hobbled painfully, supported by his father.

But just as they gained the outside door, a hired touring car drove up with a loud squeak of brakes. And out of the car jumped Elizabeth Worth, waving frantically at them.

"Jim—er, Mr. Bell, I mean," she began breathlessly. "I want to know what you've done with Mr. Brown. A man said you wanted to see him yesterday. And a little later that man tried to take him by force. Well, now he's gone again. What do you know about him?"

Her voice lost some of its anger to become almost pleading.

Jim faced her squarely.

"You ask me what I know. Suppose you tell me what you know about Allen Brown," he challenged.

Startled, she looked at him in surprise.

"Why, just that he was part of dad's legal staff at home, and that—only, please tell me."

Jim drew a step nearer.

"And your dad sent him out here?"

"Yes, but—"

"Will you tell that to the judge, with me?"

"Why, of course, if it 'll help find—" She broke off abruptly as a grin crept over Jim's face.

"Oh, you beast," she cried, "you're laughing. Please!" She turned to him entreatingly. "Tell me where Allen Brown is."

For a long moment, Jim studied her. Evidently she was innocent in the whole affair. And, thus innocent, she was ready to walk into his trap.

He wondered for a second whether it were quite fair to make her come now and unwittingly testify against her uncle—possibly get him into trouble for conspiracy. Then his jaw tightened.

The affair was not simply his own. He must think of his father who had lost his ranch—and of Red who languished in jail. He had no right in this moment to be dissuaded by sentiment.

Later, if he were able to, he could show Morton mercy which Morton had failed to show him. And this, he resolved to do for her sake. The suit settled favorably, he would press no further charges.

And if what was to happen in the next fifteen minutes should lose him all opportunity of the girl's friendship, well—no matter how much it might hurt, he couldn't help it.

"Elizabeth," he said quietly, "if you'll come with us now and tell what you've just told me to the judge, I give you my word of honor to do everything in my power to bring Brown back."

The girl assented quickly—so quickly, that once again Jim felt a little twinge of remorse.

The judge who heard the evidence gazed from one to the other in amazement. Then, his penetrating eyes came to rest finally on Elizabeth.

"Miss Worth," he inquired seriously, "do you realize what all this means?"

She shook her blond head.

"I haven't the slightest idea. I only—"

"It means," went on the judge in measured tones, "that your uncle and this Mr. Brown have conspired to defeat justice. You see, Mr. Brown, although employed by your uncle at the time, represented Mr. Bell in a case against your uncle's company. Now on the basis of that I can ask the grand jury for an indictment."

Jim spoke up. "But I don't want an indictment."

The judge rapped for order.

"In a case as serious as this, it can't be a matter of what you want or don't want."

For the moment, Jim thought that Elizabeth was going to faint.

"Oh, not my uncle," she gasped. "You don't know Uncle James. Why—"

She gazed from Jim to his father.

And with her pain and terror so evident, Jim felt his heart suddenly torn. He felt that he must cross over to her to place his arm comfortingly on her shoulder.

For the jolt to her was undoubtedly cataclysmic.

He did take a step. But her blazing eyes ordered him away.

"Oh, you're despicable! I never want to see you again, never, never, never!"

And, sobbing softly, she buried her head in her arms.

It was at that moment that a neatly tailored, black-haired man of about fifty entered the room.

"I was just thinking, your honor," he began, "since I've had a chance to sleep, my anger's simmered down a little. Guess I won't have that cow-puncher indicted for kidnaping, after all. Probably just a boyish prank, on his part."

At the sound of this man's voice, the girl rose to flee to his arms.

"Uncle James," she sobbed, "they—they say you're a criminal."

James Morton greeted the girl's tears with a gale of laughter.

But the laughter died as the judge put his niece's words into more intelligible form.

For a moment, Morton was dazed.

Then, his face drained of color, he looked up at the judge.

"But, your honor," he gasped. "I was out here on pleasure, not on business. I've been hunting all this time up on the North Rim of the Grand Cañon. I didn't even know the Southwestern Copper Company was being sued."

He turned to Bell.

"If you'd brought your case to me, I'd have paid generous damages in an instant. That's my way of doing business. When I injure some one's property, I'm anxious to repay him." He took a step nearer. "Who turned down your claim?"

Jim watched closely. The man was one of two things—an excellent actor—or truthful and innocent. And to Jim there was a light in Morton's eyes, something like the light in his niece's eyes, which made him believe the latter was the case.

Without waiting for his father to answer, he came over to Elizabeth.

"I'm sorry," he said.

For a moment she looked at him with

hostility. Then, faintly, she smiled. "And I'm sorry, too."

"Here," said Elizabeth, "I'll help you out to the car. You've got to get back to bed."

Accordingly, it was late afternoon before they learned of the final upshot—that the superintendent had confessed that he had been anxious to defeat Bell in the fear that other similar suits would cut into the company's earnings too much for him to make a good first year's showing—that he had been anxious to show a large profit in the hope that it would mean promotion, for he hated Cottonwood—and that he had secured Brown's aid by pointing out what such success would mean in increased dividends to him as a prospective member of the family.

Back in the hospital, Morton spoke slowly.

"Whenever Brown shows up, I'll have him disbarred from the practice of law. I'm willing to let it go at that, unless—"

Jim nodded.

"That's enough. And," he held out a diamond ring, "send this back to him. Maybe he can hock it for enough to get a new start."

THE END



CLOSE-UP

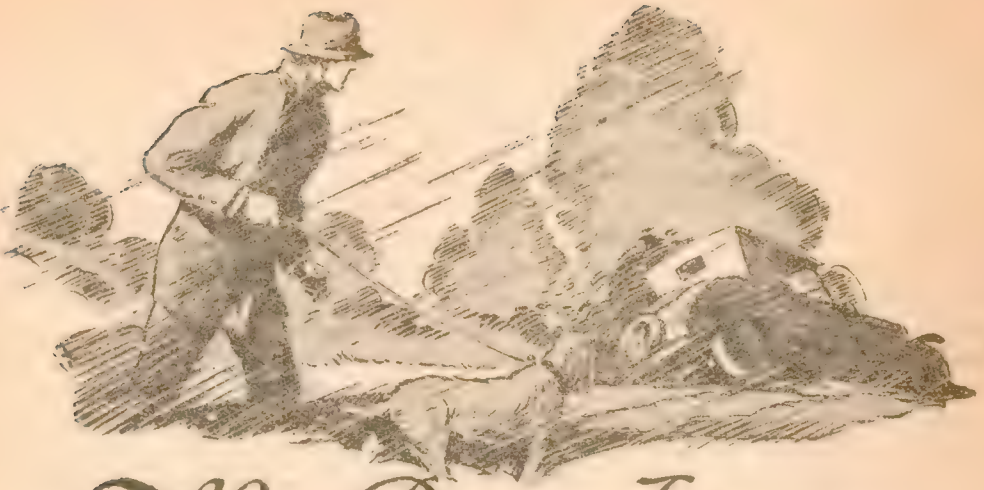
THERE is a man that I despise,
He's fat and has small, shiny eyes,
He starts across the room to holler:
"Say, Pete, ole man, lend me a dollar!"

Another person I can't stand
Is Simpkins, of the clammy hand,
Each Friday noon, he says to me:
"Oh, Peter, can you spare a V?"

And then there's Heaton, nice enough,
But, golly! How that boy does bluff—
Drives a good car and dresses nifty,
He never asks for less than fifty!

They must think I'm an easy mark,
And pass out money for a lark—
I know those birds, though you can bet
I haven't loaned them any yet!

Peter A. Lea.



The Big Idea

By HOLDEN WATT

THE man and the dog slushed along through the dark and the wet. The rain mixed with the dirt of the road, making wads of mud that clung to the feet at each step.

Unprepared for anything of the sort, the man turned up the collar of his coat and plowed on. He led the dog by a rope. But the dog followed closely. He seemed afraid of losing the friendly contact.

"Seems as if we must be 'most there," muttered the man.

The road was deserted; not even an occasional car passed. The rain settled into a steady patter.

At frequent intervals the man stopped and patted the head of the dog.

No realization of the damage being done his clothes crossed the man's mind. He had not yet become used to considering a small item like a tailor's bill. The complete change in his fortunes confronted him only at odd moments.

It was the last of August that the blow had fallen. Now it was the end of October. Two months was hardly time to get used to a complete change in one's way of

living. And Jed Livingston was still a bit dazed at the trick fortune had played him.

He had left college in the spring with no other thought than to return for his senior year. As usual, he had accompanied his mother abroad for the summer months. For some unexplained reason his father had refused to go with them.

Then just after his mother and Jed settled down in Cortina to enjoy the Dalomite country, they had received word that Jedediah Livingston, Sr., had died. The family fortune had preceded him by a few days.

There followed one of those nightmares through which one manages somehow to live. At last the city and the country homes were sold and the bills paid.

Jed and his mother found themselves in a small cottage in the suburbs of a strange city. They preferred making the fresh start in a new place.

Much to Jed's annoyance, Mrs. Livingston insisted on helping with the income. She spent her days in a firm that needed some one who could attend to the foreign correspondence. She said that she liked her job because it kept her from thinking.

Not so with Jed. He loathed and despised his position as professor at a girls' finishing school. He had no especial objection to girls as individuals. But girls in a bunch were proving more than he could stand. The idea of his mother supporting the establishment, however, kept him doggedly on his job.

There must come an opening some time if he kept his eyes and ears open—a chance for a regular man's job. At present teaching French, Spanish, and Italian to a lot of silly girls seemed the only thing at hand to do.

From living so much abroad he could converse with ease and grace in any of the languages. Where grammar was concerned he was skimming often on thin ice.

He had a strong suspicion, too, that there was method among Miss Ferguson's scholars in trying to corner him. All they really wanted was to be able to speak correctly. Grammar in general and irregular verbs in particular meant nothing in their young lives.

The young imps would fix their wide-open eyes on the youthful professor and ask disconcerting questions. Jed had no idea that they thirsted after information. He knew in his heart that he was simply being vamped.

The lonely, rain-splashed road was a far cry from the hated schoolroom. Jed gloried in it. Even with the rain it was preferable to the small cottage room where he would otherwise be tackling impossible French verbs for the next day's class.

And the road might be leading Jed into what he so ardently desired. Who knew but what it was a highroad into the heart of an adventure that would turn the schoolroom into a workroom, the professor into a working man, and the days he dreaded into ones to be anticipated.

The adventure had started as Jed was on his way from school. He left the bus as usual at the avenue. He lived on a side street two blocks from the avenue.

He was met by an Irish terrier, the same that was now trotting along so devotedly at his heels. Jed always had owned dogs before the crash came. This Irish terrier reminded him painfully of the one that had

been sold with the country home. The place and everything on it had gone at one fell swoop.

Jed greeted the dog as a passing friend. After he had gone a short distance he turned, conscious that he was being followed.

"See here, old man, this will never do," he admonished the dog. "I wish you belonged to me, but you don't, you see, so trot along home."

With serious eyes fixed intently on Jed, the dog stood still. Then as Jed again walked on, the dog trotted after him.

There were intermittent protestations on Jed's part—respectful attention on the dog's. At last they came to the small cottage where Jed lived.

It was after dinner that the big idea had come to Jed. Not knowing what else to do, he had taken the dog in. His mother and he had shared their meal with him; from the first the dog seemed to feel very much at home.

Jed had discovered on the dog's collar the name Kearny. He also learned that he belonged to John William Anderson, of Meadowbrook Farm.

Now, Jed knew that Meadowbrook Farm was one of the show places about three miles out of town. He also knew that John William Anderson was owner of a prosperous factory in the neighborhood.

The factory manufactured engines. Engines had always been a fad of Jed's. He had always possessed a keen interest in the various improvements.

The big idea was to return Kearny to his rightful owner. While doing this, to engage this same owner in pleasant conversation and make him realize that his factory would be several degrees more successful if it had on its pay roll one Jed Livingston.

There would be some chance for a fellow in a factory like Anderson's. At the end of a long and busy life as a professor at Miss Ferguson's select school he would be exactly where he was now.

He would be willing to enter the Anderson factory in any capacity whatever. If necessary he would start with a dinner pail and blue jeans.

Anxious to reach Meadowbrook, Jed had tried a short cut over a dirt road. Then the rain had started in.

He was not thinking of the discomforts of the night as he strode along. Instead, he was arranging in his mind the opening of his interview with Mr. Anderson. He would decide on how to begin when a new idea would occur to him that seemed better.

In the first place, he would have it distinctly understood that he was not asking a position in the factory as a reward for the return of Kearny. Of course the dog must be returned, no matter how much Jed might like to keep him.

It simply seemed like an inspiration to use the coming interview as a means of reaching the one in authority—a chance of finding out if there was any sort of opening for him.

Confident that he must be nearing the main road on which Meadowbrook Farm was situated, Jed was peering keenly ahead. Then suddenly he quickened his pace. A low whistle of consternation escaped him.

Through the gloom he could see a few yards ahead the outlines of a car. Tipped toward the ditch that ran apparently deep at that point, it looked as if it might complete the somersault at any moment.

"Hello, there!" greeted Jed as he peered into the dark interior of the machine.

There was no answer.

"Nobody home," concluded Jed, after waiting several seconds.

He went around the car to its down side. Here he discovered that the situation was not nearly so serious as had at first appeared, in the mysterious gloom. The bank sloped gently, not at all abruptly. The car rested on good firm earth—did not hang suspended as he had thought on a narrow ledge ready to topple over. The road was hardly more than a lane.

It looked as if some one had run the car purposely to one side to get out of the way of any chance traffic. Some one who knew what he was doing. But where was he now?

As the moments sped by and no one came, Jed grew more and more puzzled. It

was a valuable car, a roadster. Not one to abandon on a side road.

Besides being a side road, it was a particularly deserted section. There was not a sign of a house or building of any sort in sight.

"Dumb-bell!" Jed accused himself of gross stupidity. "He's run out of gas and gone after some."

He climbed in and put his foot on the self-starter. It responded promptly. So that theory was exploded.

Perhaps it was a stolen car. The thief becoming scared might have abandoned it. In that case Jed wondered what it would be best to do.

Should he drive it back the few miles to town? Would it be better to leave it and report it on his return?

It seemed as if he had been trying to solve the problem for some hours. In reality it had been merely a matter of a few minutes when he became conscious of Kearny.

He had forgotten all about the dog. He must have dropped the rope when he got in the car or perhaps when he first saw it. He couldn't remember.

Now the dog had evidently found something that was disturbing him. Jed heard from somewhere in the rear a low, troubled whine.

He slid quickly out and around the back of the car to the other side. Here he found Kearny crouched along the road, whining over something that had evidently slipped into the ditch on that side.

Going close, Jed discovered it to be the figure of a man.

He had left the lights of the car on. But this did not help as it lighted the road only in front. He decided he would have to turn the car before trying to do anything.

The man must be the owner of the car. Perhaps he had gone around to see about something in the rear. Some noise must have bothered him. In the dark he had stepped or slipped off the road into the ditch.

Jed turned the car. As there seemed to be no traffic, he took the chance of parking on the wrong side.

As he got down to try to discover the

trouble the man began to mutter incoherently. Jed replied soothingly and went on with his plans. Kearny sat patiently by, watching with anxious eyes.

Jed discovered that it was the leg that had been injured. Perhaps it had been broken by doubling under in the fall. The man might also have struck his head on a stray stone.

He would have to get him somehow into the roadster. It would be better than to leave him on the road and go for help. Once in the car he could go on to the highway that must be only a matter of a short distance now. On the good road he could get the victim to a hospital in the city in very short order.

It was anything but an easy task. Jed half lifted, half dragged the man to the road; then using all his strength, he hoisted him into the car.

As Jed took the seat beside him, he realized that the injured man was speaking.

He was using all the will power he possessed to get something explained and to remain conscious till he had accomplished it.

At last Jed gathered that the man was begging him to meet Jane at the Charleston at eight o'clock.

The Charleston was one of the city's big hotels. To ease the man's mind and without thinking much about it Jed promised.

Jed knew he would be late in keeping the appointment, for it must be nearly eight already. The injured man, however, seemed greatly relieved and slipped quietly off into unconsciousness again.

Then just as Jed was about to start he suddenly remembered Kearny. The dog was there waiting for orders. At the word he jumped in, crowding close to Jed and giving the hurt man all the room possible.

II.

JED did not wait long at the hospital. Just long enough to find that he had been right in his surmise.

It was the leg that had been broken—just below the knee. The man had been stunned also by a slight blow on the head,

probably when he fell. There was no immediate danger, so Jed hurried off.

Jed's plan was to hasten to the Charleston. He would get "Jane" and return to the hospital with her as quickly as possible.

Then Kearny and he would start out again on the quest of his future job.

With the speedy roadster it would not take long. That is if Jane was ready at the Charleston and did not keep him waiting.

As he was parking as near as he could get to the hotel it suddenly occurred to Jed that he had failed to find out the injured man's name. Jane was, of course, his wife—but Jane who? How was he ever to find—just Jane.

It was absurd! Jed now realized that he had been much more concerned about getting the man to the hospital than with his promise about Jane. He would have promised almost anything to ease the fellow's mind.

However a promise was a promise!

He would have to make some sort of a try. He entered the hotel without being able to think up any clever way of beginning the search.

He looked about the brightly lighted lobby. He looked at the women. There were all kinds, young, old, and middle-aged.

He had an irresistible impulse to duck and run. He realized it would soon be too late to return Kearny and have the momentous interview with Mr. Anderson.

He did not believe that Jane stood in dire need of a rescuer. She must certainly be old enough to take care of herself unless the injured man had married some one a great deal younger than himself.

Anyway, girls knew how to take care of themselves nowadays.

Jed looked toward the door with the longing to escape. Then the promise he had made loomed large.

He began walking through the various rooms. Soon he felt fairly dazed. It would be difficult enough to locate any one without any predetermined meeting place. But to know neither the person nor the exact spot made it seem just about impossible.

The hotel seemed fairly swarming with women. Jed felt that he had stepped out

of the frying pan of Miss Ferguson's select school into the fire of this glistening bevy of flappers. To Jed they all seemed attempting to flap no matter what their age.

Figuratively, Jed tore his hair for having got into such a mess. He stood on one foot, then the other, wondering what to do next.

Then he became conscious of being watched by a woman at a little distance. Jed had noticed her before and thought she might be waiting for some one.

She must be about the right age. She was pretty well dolled up. Still, how was he to know whether that was the way the injured man liked them or not?

Anxious to get it over with and be on his way to Meadowbrook Farm, Jed made a sudden resolve.

There was only one way to find out. Quickly going up to the painted doll he spoke. A few minutes before she had been looking at him with a most encouraging friendliness.

"Do you happen to be—" then he realized that it sounded a bit too familiar to say just "Jane," so he broke off, beginning again on a new tack: "Were you expecting to meet some one here?"

He wished with all his heart that he had thought over what he wanted to say before beginning. What he had said seemed so absurd.

The doll thought so, too. She fixed him with a stony glare, replying in frigid tones:

"I'm very certain I was not expecting to meet you!"

Jed mumbled apologies. Conscious of defeat he backed away. Yet he knew all the time that she might be Jane.

He certainly had bungled it. But what could he have said that sounded sane?

He looked around the brilliantly lighted room. How many in all the crowd could answer to the name of Jane?

He had a feeling that Jane was not a very unusual name. Shirley, Althea, Ariana, Drusilla would have been easier for him.

There must be something unusual going on at the Charleston—something to account for the large number of men and women passing through the hospitably open doors.

"It couldn't be worse," groaned Jed. "Now what am I to do?"

Without feeling irritated over it, forgetting John William Anderson for the moment, studying the matter calmly, how could he find this Jane woman? There must be some answer.

But Jed hoped with all his heart that he would never be asked to answer such a stickler again.

Jane certainly sounded very plain, sober, even homely. Probably she was not a dolled-up sort of person. More likely she was a relative from the country.

She might be a cousin. At any rate it was now evident to Jed's impatient reasoning that she was some one from the country.

He toured the various rooms of the hotel with this theory uppermost in his mind. But there was no one who even remotely resembled a country cousin.

There was no one who was not the very last thing in fashionable attire.

And then straight before him Jed saw a sign that made him start with quick anticipation. He was facing a door. On the glass pane of this in plain gold letters was written:

JANE'S SHOPPE

"What do you know about that?" Jed rubbed his eyes and read it again to make sure he was seeing right.

At last he had found Jane, the Jane the injured man had expected to meet! He probably called for her each evening and drove her home.

Of course it was the fashionable thing to do—to have some sort of a "shoppe" tucked away somewhere. Being a shop with an "e" removed it from anything in the nature of a common occupation.

Jed quickly made up his mind. There were all sorts of things on display, things for one who might need an article of attire that he had forgotten or found unexpectedly shapeless on unpacking.

Stepping briskly inside the little store Jed examined thoughtfully the various neckties. This gave him a chance to take stock of Jane.

As he gravely selected a tie he came to the conclusion that the best thing to do would be to tell his predicament frankly.

He sketched the earlier happenings of the evening as briefly as possible.

While they were alone Jane listened with attention and sympathy. But soon a prospective shopper arrived. And then Jed learned that the purchase of the expensive necktie had been a useless expense.

Jane was not the Jane he was searching for. She was not expecting any one in a snappy roadster or any car for that matter. She was sorry, but she didn't see that there was any way she could help. She wished she might, but her time was taken up with her shoppe.

Jed took the hint and departed. He left the shoppe without Jane. He was however the possessor of a necktie that he needed about as much as a cat needs whiskers.

"So that's that." For some inexplicable reason this last encounter roused Jed's fighting spirit. "If that Jane woman is anywhere in this Charleston, by heck, I'm going to find her!"

He hadn't any more idea now how it was to be accomplished than he had at first. Continued failure was making him obstinate.

Then a plan suddenly flashed across his mind. Pushing his way as rapidly as possible through the crowds he made for the desk.

Stupid he hadn't thought of it before. The simplest thing in the world, too.

Of course the way to find Jane was to have her paged.

Reaching the desk he explained what he wanted.

A bell-boy was called. He stood on one foot with the other poised ready for instant flight.

Then the awful recollection dawned on Jed that Jane was the only name he knew. No amount of tip would persuade the bell-boy to go through the hotel calling: "Jane, Jane!" Besides, since the necktie episode, funds were at a low ebb.

If it wasn't so tragic it would be funny. How had he happened to start this thing that he couldn't finish anyway? He wondered if he was beginning to lose his mind.

Drat the whole business. Playing the good Samaritan had certainly tangled him up terribly besides losing him the chance of

an interview with John Anderson, at least for that night.

Jed began to feel that the superior clerk behind the desk was regarding him with suspicious eyes. The bell-boy also seemed unnecessarily curious.

It would be absurd to explain that Jane was all the name he knew of the person he wanted paged. It would sound as if he were an escaped lunatic. If he kept silent any longer they'd be sure of it.

"What name did you say?" The clerk's tone was crisp.

"Jane," after gulping several times Jed blurted out: "Anderson—Jane Anderson," he repeated it as if the name rather pleased him.

This name of the man he had expected to call on happened to be the first that came to his mind.

He mopped an excited brow as the boy started off calling in unnecessarily loud tones:

"Miss Jane Anderson."

"I didn't say 'miss,'" muttered Jed.

"What's that?" quickly asked the clerk.

"It's no matter." What Jed refrained from saying was: "It's none of your blank business. If you hadn't been so darned impatient I wouldn't have got into this last mess."

This was not altogether true, but Jed was beginning to feel that he was spending more time on this stranger's business than he was called on to do. If it hadn't been for the injured man he might this very minute be accepting a position in the Anderson factory.

Of course it was too late to call now. He would wait for the bellboy to return. Then he would get the car and Kearny.

Poor Kearny! He had had a long wait. He would take the car back to the hospital. If the injured man were conscious he would explain to him that he had failed to locate his wife.

The bellboy was returning. Jed fished out a modest tip and handed it to him. The boy vanished and Jed was about to depart when—

The girl must have followed closely behind the page. She smiled at Jed, then held out a friendly hand.

"Well." There was a slight pause, then: "How are you, Sam?"

Jed opened his mouth to explain that, unfortunately, he had been baptized Jedediah. But before he could say a word the girl continued:

"Sam, I want you to meet Willis, Willis Armstrong. You never have happened to meet before, have you?"

And Jed found his hand in the weak, uncertain clasp of the unknown Willis. Again he started to set things straight, but the girl gave him no time.

"You certainly were late in getting here," She rested a hand confidently on Jed's arm. "Now you trot right along, Willis, for Sam will see me home."

Without relaxing her hold on Jed's arm she held out her right hand to Willis.

"Delighted," began Jed, "only you see—"

"Don't say you haven't time," the girl interrupted.

"All the time in the world," lied Jed politely and was again cut off.

"Then everything is all right. Good-by, Willis. See you again perhaps, some day."

The girl turned and walked Jed hurriedly away.

There was silence between them as they left the hotel. When they reached the street the girl dropped Jed's arm. She turned and faced him.

"It was awfully decent of you to let me adopt you as a temporary friend. Just call a taxi, please, and I'll not bother you any longer."

Jed had been steering the girl toward the place where he had parked the car. So now he said with a wave of his hand:

"Why bother about a taxi when you have a perfectly good car at your disposal?"

The girl looked from Jed to the car. Then she looked again at Jed and again at the car.

"He won't bite. Let me make you acquainted with a particularly nice Irish gentleman by the name of Kearny."

"Are you the new chauffeur?"

Jed thought he detected disappointment in the girl's voice. Perhaps it was annoyance at realizing she had been so familiar with a family employee.

"No such luck." There was real regret in the professor's tone.

"Then how do you happen to have my dad's car?"

Jed looked at the girl with eyes of amazement. Then he asked in an awe-struck voice:

"Is your name Jane?"

"You can call me Evangeline, if you'd rather."

While they were fitting themselves into the car with Kearny between them, Jed was thinking hard.

There was no doubt about it. This was the injured man's daughter. This was the Jane he had come to the Charleston to meet.

That was the way things seemed to go in life. As he had just given up trying to find her she had found him.

He must tell her about her father's accident. He wished he didn't have to. But she must know. Any minute she might renew the question of how it happened he had her father's car.

Dreading the telling, Jed hedged for time by asking:

"Was Willis becoming—er—monotonous? And why the Sam?"

"Worse than that," replied Jane to the first question. "I'd been trying for the last half hour to get rid of the goup. I simply couldn't resist you as an excuse, and while I was hesitating what to call you the orchestra began playing 'Samson and Delilah.' Now tell me all about it."

So Jed began at the beginning, even as far back as his meeting up with Kearny. Jane did not ask any questions or interrupt in any way.

When Jed told her about finding the injured man he could hear the quick intake of her breath. Then it seemed as if she hardly breathed till, in his narrative, he reached the hospital with his patient and received the verdict of "painful but not serious."

When he had finished he felt rather ashamed of himself. He had talked confidentially to this stranger. He had told her how he felt about the professorship at the girls' school. He even confessed about his having meant to call on Mr. Anderson

when he returned Kearny—hoping for an opening in his factory.

He had a wonderful feeling that she understood and sympathized.

Then Jane asked quietly:

"Of course you are taking me to the hospital?"

Jed nodded.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come to the family rescue once more," said Jane. "After you've left me at the hospital, will you take the car and go for my brother? He said he would be at home working on his radio this evening. He can drive you to yours and then join me at the hospital. We're piling up obligations—"

"Don't for a minute think that," cut in Jed.

"How about your expected visit to Mr. Anderson? But you will go. Promise me you will call at Meadowbrook Farm not later than to-morrow night," begged Jane earnestly.

"On one condition. That you wish me luck," replied Jed as he pulled up in front of the hospital.

"With all my heart." Jane slid to the curb before Jed had time to help her.

Kearny started to follow, but Jane sent him back.

Then Jed suddenly became practical.

"I don't know your last name. How can I get your brother when I don't know where he lives?"

"You had me paged. My brother answers to the same name. He also lives with dad and me at Meadowbrook Farm."

"Jane Anderson," said Jed in amazement. "Jane, I say Jane," he called. But without turning Jane had disappeared into the hospital.

Jed climbed quickly back into the car. After starting he turned and patted Kearny gratefully on the head.

"And to think that all the time you're an Anderson. It's a queer old world, isn't it, Kearny?"

The dog agreed by sitting closer.

"And it was your master we found. Your mistress we paged. To even a casual observer it would look as if you might have me not only an employee at the factory, but a member of the family!"

And Kearny agreed with as enthusiastic a wag as his short stump of a tail was capable of.

THE END



THE WEST

I KNOW the West, though not so well, perhaps,
As some of you old broncho-bustin' chaps:
It is a land of vast unbroken spaces,
Wind-sifted sands, and weather-beaten faces,
Nature, in what they call, unfettered state;
I know the West—I came through on a freight.

I know the West, its cattle have long horns,
You see them grazing early, summer morns;
And every field, designed to give a bounty
Of wheat or corn, must cover half a county;
It's short on trees, on cactus it is great.
I know the West—I came through on a freight.

I know the West, I could be writing tales
Of Two-Gun Pete, whose courage never fails:
But when I think of putting down such drivel
As other authors pen, I seem to shrivel,
The theme's too big, too broad, I have to wait,
I know the West—I came through on a freight.

L. Mitchell Thornton.

THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

TWO hundred and seventy-four guesses to date—January 18—on the identity of “Eyes West!” author and only thirteen of them correct! This without counting any of the seven advanced by E. M. B., whose letter appears below. Instead of telling our readers soon who it is, as she begs us to, we are going to print another serial from the same source, a rattling good one, too, full of pep, action and gunplay. Then the guessing can go merrily on. The sequel to “The War Chief” has just been finished.

DETROIT, MICH.

The ARGOSY was the one and only all fiction magazine that my father would have in the house when I was a youngster. It was in yellow covers and came out once a month. I've read it ever since, and that's been over twenty years, so I feel that I'm quite an old friend.

I enjoy Fred MacIsaac's stories—George Worts, Charles Francis Coe, Hulbert Footner, Seltzer, Brand, Johnson—honest, to write all the ones I like to read would take the rest of the afternoon. I like all of them part of the time, and most of them all of the time, and that covers it.

“The Return of George Washington” had a real kick in it. Enjoy Don Waters's railroad yarns. My special fondness is a good mystery story. However, the ARGOSY is a well balanced magazine and it agrees with hubby and me. He cleans up on each week's ARGOSY. I wait until I have three or four complete stories—then what a time! I read it all and find many gems in the little poems, lots of fun in the Reader's Viewpoint, and wonderful entertainment in the stories. That's what I read 'em for—entertainment—and I get it. Some of the stories, such as “The Future Eve,” and “Sea Lure” I don't like as well as others, but I read them, anyway, and get something to think about after all.

I've guessed till I'm dizzy about “Eyes West!” and I give up. Please tell us soon, and relieve our suspense. First I said MacIsaac, then Johnson, Seltzer, Perkins, Worts, Brent, Burroughs, but I'm *bushed*. Wish Mr. Burroughs would give us a sequel to “The War Chief.” Can't forget that boy is *white*.
E. M. B.

BOSTON, MASS.

I have been a reader of the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY for about two years and can truthfully say I never yet came across an issue which I did not enjoy. Your serials cannot be beaten. Another thing I appreciate very much are the poems, especially those by Raymond Cash. Your best writer by far is Fred MacIsaac. His stories, “The Pancake Princess” and “The Mysterious Stranger,” were excellent. At present I am reading “What! Los Angeles?” and it appears great. In regard to the Westerns, I think ARGOSY would be incomplete without them. What a magazine needs is a wide range of settings and the Westerns always suit me. “Moonglow,” which was printed quite awhile ago, was great. I read it about four

times and no doubt will read it four times more. Charles Francis Coe is generally good, but “Alkali” was one story I could not get interested enough in to finish reading. Probably if I had read on farther I might have liked it better, as I usually enjoy anything by Coe. As long as ARGOSY keeps up its variety and good list of authors I'll be an interested reader.
R. L. K.

MELROSE PARK, ILL.

I have been a reader of the ARGOSY for a number of years, that is, off and on, but I have hardly missed a number since you issued Don Waters's “On to Florida.” I have just read the Reader's Viewpoint for January 7, and I entirely agree with Dr. J. L. S., of Wallace, Idaho, about “true-to-life” stories. I believe every man has his likes and dislikes, and certainly think I prefer the above-mentioned type of story; although, as the saying goes, “A little nonsense now and then is relished by the best of men!”

I just finished George F. Worts's “Who Did Kill Ezra Kragg?” and it is a very puzzling story, something like the “Lady and Tiger” story, isn't it? Three cheers for G. F. Worts, Don Waters, Laurance Hare, and the rest!

After I read the George Washington story, I came to the conclusion that the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY has the best run of stories, *bar none*, in America!
L. W. C.

ARNOLD, PA.

I am very much interested in the Reader's Viewpoint and have been thinking of writing for some time, so here I am. I have been reading ARGOSY for several years and think it beats other magazines that cost much more than it does, but of all your stories I never had one to come anywhere near being as intensely interesting as “The Return of George Washington” and when one reads fiction one should take it as fiction and not confuse it with facts, as one of the readers of Reader's Viewpoint seems to do.

MRS. B. E. W.

INDIANAPOLIS, IND.

Since the Reader's Viewpoint department was instituted I have been following it with great interest to get other readers' opinions on the different stories published in your magazine. In the December 31 issue I noticed the first letter from a reader in Indianapolis, J. N. B., which

acted as an incentive for the writing of this letter. Had been reading the *All-Story* previous to the consolidation with the *ARGOSY* and thought it was fine then, but it is better than ever now, and I do not understand why any one should kick as I think your selection of stories cannot be beat.

What happened to E. K. Means who wrote those delightful Tickfall stories? Enjoyed very much Mr. Coe's story, "Geechee Shad." Looked in vain for Laurance Hare's railroad story in the last number, as I am very interested in *Scrub Smith's* adventures. Keep the *ARGOSY-ALLSTORY* just as it is, as I do not see how it can be bettered. Only wish it was published daily instead of weekly.

EDWIN A. A.

LONG BEACH, CAL.

I note that Long Beach has not been heard from for some time in the Reader's Viewpoint, and I want you to know that we love your magazine out here as much as anywhere in your great territory of sales. I have followed the Reader's Viewpoint since its inception very closely with a vast amount of pleasure and not a little amusement. It is indeed highly interesting for an advertising man to watch the great difference in appeal of some of your writers on the huge army of readers the *ARGOSY* enjoys.

The great majority of *ARGOSY* readers are perfectly satisfied just as it is, and do not kick. Millions buy it and read it every week from one end of our country to the other, and even in the far corners of the world; so, after all, that seems the acid test.

So I say to our editor: Let the howlers howl, the growlers growl, and squawkers squawk, for he has the most popular magazine on the market in the story class. I, for one, and I speak for several, will buy it at any price.

D. H.

PLAINS, KAN.

I have been a constant reader of the Frank A. Munsey magazines since 1890, the *ARGOSY*, the *Cavalier*, and the *All-Story*. I haven't missed a copy of the *ARGOSY* or the *All-Story* since 1904, nor the *ARGOSY-ALLSTORY* since the two were combined. I save up a year's numbers, then pass them on to some one else, a sick or poor person that cares for them, and have been thanked a hundred times for them and a good many of them have subscribed for the magazine since then.

I sure like the diversified variety of the stories; they keep a person interested. I am of the same opinion as P. B. C., of Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Give us five serials instead of four; otherwise let her ride as is.

S. T. W.

SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

This is my second letter, but I never saw the first one published. I have been an ardent fan of your magazine off and on for five years. From now on I'm a steady reader. Recently I read in the *ARGOSY* a novelette, "Drums of the Leop-

ardmen," which I thought about as good a story as was ever written. Your novelettes are usually swell, but Will McMorrow's "World of Indexed Numbers" didn't appeal to me at all. Being an employee in the public library of this city, I have a good "shot" at most of the new fiction, but give me the *ARGOSY*.

I have just finished "Case One Hundred and One." A. T. Locke ought to be popular after that. "The Return of George Washington" was implausible, but novel and entertaining enough. "Adventurers All" promises a lot. Ben Conlon evidently knows what he is writing about.

P. O'C.

P. S.—Who wrote "Miss Wynn's Secret" and "Alkali"?

Elizabeth York Miller is the author of the first and Charles Francis Coe of the second.

WORCESTER, MASS.

Now that the year 1927 has passed away, I'd like to give you my opinion of what your magazine has done during it. I first want to state that the *ARGOSY* is the best fiction magazine on the market. It deserves that sweeping statement because it has the best writers and because of its wide variety. The best story of the year was "The Return of George Washington," by George F. Worts. It was cleverly written, and the dénouement of the last installment was not only unexpected, but also original. I rate this tale as one hundred per cent. There are four more stories worthy of that great percentage: "Alkali," by Charles Francis Coe; "Seven Footprints to Satan," by A. Merritt; "Thundering Dawns," by Will McMorrow; and "Far Gold," by Arthur Hunt Chute.

There are five stories that deserve to be rated ninety-nine per cent. They are these: "The Devil's Flower," by John Wilstach; "The Sun Test," by Richard Barry; "Paid in Advance," by Edgar Franklin; "The Love Bandit," by George F. Worts; and "Captain Will-o'-the-Wisp," by Joseph Ivers Lawrence.

The remaining stories are all good—a story can't be other than good when it's in the *ARGOSY*—but they just haven't got "it."

The best author of the year is George F. Worts, because he wrote the two stories that achieved one hundred per cent and ninety-nine per cent. Will McMorrow comes next with his "Thundering Dawns," which I would have listed as the best story of the year had not "The Return of George Washington" been published. The other authors follow in the rank of their magnitude: Joseph Ivers Lawrence, A. Merritt, Arthur Hunt Chute, John Wilstach, Fred MacIsaac, and Elizabeth York Miller.

"Going Down," by Parkhurst and Seabrook, was the best novelette of 1927.

The guessing contest is a good idea. Keep 'em up. I think MacIsaac wrote "Eyes West."

M. C.

SOME HEADLINERS

to appear shortly in

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

THE GREATEST MONEY'S WORTH IN THE WORLD OF FICTION

THE APACHE DEVIL

Thrills of the Indian fighters

HIS SERVICE TO FOLLY

A sea tale packed with action

HAWAIIAN HEELS

Intrigue and conspiracy in Honolulu

THE CRIME CIRCUS

Making a murder trial pay its costs

ROPE NECKTIES

On the trail of vengeance

RESTLESS GUNS

A Western with the speed of a bullet

DAMMING HAIRPIN CAÑON

Bitter rivalry among the hills

THE CRATER

Hot blood in Mexican waters

THE FIGHT OF FIGHTS

Queering the championship bout

RED HOT

Slipping from small business into big peril

The foregoing stories were written by the authors listed alphabetically below. We leave to you the fun of fitting the titles to the writers before they are formally announced in the magazine:

AUTHOR OF "EYES WEST"

RICHARD BARRY

EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS

CHARLES DIVINE

FRED MacISAAC

MORGAN MANSFIELD

KENNETH PERKINS

C. C. WADDELL

JOHN WILSTACH

GEORGE F. WORTS

These are only a few of the attractions to appear during the next few months in this great weekly magazine—160 reading pages each issue

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